THE BIBLICAL AND ETHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE PREACHING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: A THEOLOGY OF BLACK HOPE

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

The Biblical and Ethical Elements in the Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Theology of Black Hope

Cornelius Gray

Martin Luther King was a product of academia but he did his interpretation within the milieu of the Black American Christian community; a community which sees God and Jesus Christ as the God of the Exodus who continues his work of liberation in delivering them and all oppressed people from racial and economic injustice to freedom and justice.

To understand King, he must be studied within his context: his blackness and the Black Church which influenced his life. The Black Church so impacted King that his graduate work was an "intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil--racism." His search led him to nonviolent protest. But, in practice, "the nonviolent civil rights movement has come . . . from the heart of the Negro Church."

King drew upon the Black Church tradition whose Biblical interpretation is brought to bear on the Black struggle for racial justice. His radical interpretation of the Old Testament prophets was informed by agape love taught by Jesus. King fused his New Testament

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understanding of cross-love with the spirit of the Old Testament prophets and carved out an interpretation consistent with the Black preachers of antebellum.

In his sermons, addresses, and books he employed the Negro Spirituals for their liberating elements. His reason, "We too are in bondage." He mingled the Biblical themes of love and justice with the slave stories of suffering and hope, American democratic principles of freedom and equality in the tone, voice, and rhythmic phrases of Black Baptist preachers and spoke to the heart of religious America.

Anglo-American writers on King's life, with their penchant for emphasizing only the intellect, have constantly reproduced a pale copy of the Martin Luther King, Jr. who touched the hearts of millions through his interpretation and preaching.

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Without the generosity and understanding of my uncomplaining wife, Laura Gray, while I was away from home many summers, this dissertation would not have been completed.

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CHAPTER 1

Thesis

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a product of academia but he did his interpretation within the milieu of the Black American Christian community; a community which sees God and Jesus Christ as the God of the Exodus who continues his work of liberation in delivering them and all oppressed peoples from racial and economic injustice to freedom and justice.

Limitation of the Study

There are many facets of King's life on which one can do serious research. To name a few: King's concept of the Kingdom of God; his preaching as a model in rhetoric and oratory; his understanding of the "beloved community."

Although this paper will deal with some aspects of King's ethical thought, it will not concentrate on King's ethical thoughts on war or his ethical concept of law. The dissertation will confine itself to the Biblical and ethical elements of King's preaching as he sought, by his preaching and teaching, to relate these Christian principles to the Black American struggle for racial, spiritual and economic freedom.

Methodology

The primary method of doing this dissertation is an in-depth research in the number of written sermons,

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speeches, and books which King wrote. Also, the paper will examine many of his taped and recorded sermons, and it will draw information from the growing body of literature that is available on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Importance of the Study

Ever since the preacher-activist, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, many have sought to understand him and, consequently, to place him and his movement in proper perspective. Hence, much has been written about Martin Luther King, Jr. But many, unfortunately, failed to come to terms with his distinctive heritage as a black man. Apparently, they thought that this factor was irrelevant to his thought.

Thus, Herbert Richardson, writing in 1968, made a significant claim for King as "the most important theologian of our time," yet he was not interested in King's blackness. Richardson dealt with King's insight into the character of evil in society--the problem for dealing with evil by returning love for hatred.[1] But there is no hint here that the intellectual process has anything to do with social factors, such as blackness. However, King was not a racial neuter. In the light of his involvement in the Black struggle in the United States, it seems rather

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[1] Herbert W. Richardson, "Martin Luther King: Unsung Theologian," New Theology, no. 6, eds. Martin Marty and Dean G. Pearman (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 178.

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strange that King's analysis of evil and his focus on "somebodiness" should be seriously discussed without reference to his peculiar experience of evil in America, namely white racism directed against the race which King represented.

John Rathbun, in his attempt to analyze King's thinking, not only ignored but put aside what he called King's "social and ministerial heritage" in order to concentrate on the intellectual influences on King. These, he felt, were Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, the Neo-Orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, the personalism taught at Boston University, and the nonviolent philosophy developed by Mahatma Gandhi.[2]

In their book, Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr., Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp follow the lead of Rathbun in dealing with King's intellectual heritage without any consideration of King's distinctive blackness. Certainly, they give a more adequate treatment of King's intellectual heritage than Rathbun. But, as intellectual biographers, they confine themselves to the major influences on King, the thinker. However, it is unthinkable that a Black preacher and civil rights activist should be discussed apart from the peculiar experience of the Black man in America and his religious

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[2] John W. Rathbun, "Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social Action," American Quarterly 20 (Spring 1968): 38.

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experience in particular.[3] This bracketing of a significant aspect of King's background leaves us with a pale copy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

King is also constantly being examined critically by Black scholars. In his book, Black Religion, Joseph Washington dismisses King as a theologian. He then describes King's thinking as "the absence of any real theological understanding." Washington states that King did not do theology systematically.[4] But this does not end the story of King as a theologian because all theologians are not conventional systematicians. Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a serious theologian, but he wrote what Lonnie Edmonson and Archie Logan called a "theology in context"--a theology of the work place.

Although the above-mentioned assessments of Martin Luther King, Jr. may be consistent with the goals of their authors, this writer sees King through different lenses. Consequently, the purpose of this thesis is to point out that the many-sided King was, more than anything else, a Black liberation preacher who interpreted the Bible as a continuing story of God's deliverance of His ancient people from Egyptian bondage. But King's interpretation was always informed by agape. In this, King stood in the

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[3] James H. Smylie, "On Jesus, Pharaoh, and the Chosen People," Interpretation 34 (Jan. 1970): 77.

[4] Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black Religion (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 5.

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venerable tradition of Black preachers in America.

Therefore, the importance of this dissertation is to demonstrate, first, that although King was influenced by his white mentors of academia, he did his interpretation within the milieu of the Afro-American community. This community understands the God of the Bible, the Jesus of the New Testament, and continuing work of the Spirit of God in the world in the light of the concept of liberation. Black preachers have always preached that as God led the captive Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, so God is still working now for the liberation of the enslaved. Consequently, King's words and deeds were rooted in the conviction that oppression is contrary to the will of God and that God is actively engaged in setting at liberty the oppressed.

Second, unlike conventional theologians, King wrote his theology not in a comfortable office but rather in the context of a profoundly restless people at a time when they were on the move straining from oppression toward freedom. His was a theology of the work place. This approach to theology is reminiscent of Old Testament prophets whose theology came as their faith sought to grapple with crises in the life of the ancient people of God.

This way of doing theology could probably serve as a model for ministers who must constantly apply their faith to the crisis of their people and society and from this encounter find meaning and purpose for life.

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Third, this study is important because it will focus on King's understanding of the love-ethic of Jesus Christ. The basic principles of agape have been by and large set aside as impractical in dealing with complex human problems of racial injustice. But the thesis will show that, for King, love should not only regulate relationships between individuals, but should be used as a transforming element of society in its dealing with racial segregation, war or any other human problems.

Many Christian thinkers leave love in the air without any practical implementation. Over against this approach, King made use of civil disobedience, nonviolent, direct action, and boycotts as practical expression of love. Thus, his stance was a combination of love and resistance.

In fact, King's understanding of agape puts flesh on Christian love and shows how difficult it is to love what our culture teaches us to hate and how difficult it is to translate that love into justice for the helpless and needy neighbor.

Certainly, the theology of love and nonviolence is a breath of fresh air amidst the stifling atmosphere of a violent society where "violence is as native as an apple pie." In a world sweltering with hate and revenge, "love of the enemy" is a wise alternative for oppressed but sane people.

Such a theology which injects new blood in the concept and practice of love should be of importance to all serious

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Christians.

Fourth, King's approach to the Bible in appropriating its themes for his struggle for racial and social justice is unconventional for white Christian America. But this is the way the Bible has been used by Black American preachers. Hence, King's posture was consistent with his heritage.

A fifth importance of this dissertation is that it raises a crucial issue for future research and discussion by serious students of Martin Luther King's preaching and thought.

Work Already Done in the Field

James Smylie, in an insightful and penetrating article, "On Jesus, Pharaohs and the Chosen People: Martin Luther King as Biblical Interpreter," points in the right direction in the way King should be seen. Commenting on a junior high Black student's assessment of Martin Luther King, "He was our Moses," Smylie said that the junior high student "stated clearly what more sophisticated writers seem to avoid as they attempt to trace King's ideas to Walter Rauschenbusch" and others. Smylie gives two reasons for taking this stance.

> The first is that the biblical theme of exodus out of bondage has been an important influence upon the Negro's interpretation of his experience in America, while Moses has been a primary paradigm for black leadership.
>
> Secondly, if King is to be understood in the proper perspective, he must be treated within the context of the biblical witness as an interpreter of the Bible and a Christian humanist.[5]

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Stating the impact of social factors in a person's thinking, Smylie observes:

> As a descendant of slaves, reared and educated within America's Negro Community, King shared with that community its religious memories, and moved his New Testament understanding of Jesus to an understanding of the Old Testament theme of Exodus.[6]

Gayraud S. Wilmore in his book, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, concurs with the posture above in the following statement:

> In recognizing the meaning of Jesus and His Kingdom in relation to the great prophets of justice in the Old Testament, Turner's reading of scriptures adumbrated the Black theology of preachers from Henry Highland Garnet . . . to Martin Luther King, Jr. who understood Jesus as a protagonist of radical social change.[7]

Certainly, this view of Martin Luther King makes more sense to people within the Black community than that which placed his intellectual contributions among his white mentors and his body and emotions among his Black brethren.

In this connection, Paul Garber, in an article, "King was a Black Theologian," warns that the bracketing off of King's blackness "leaves us with a rather pale copy of the man and his thinking."[8] For Garber, "King was a black

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[5] Smylie, 74.

[6] Ibid., 76-77.

[7] Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 92.

[8] Paul Garber, "King Was a Black Theologian," Journal of Religious Thought 31 (Fall 1974): 18.

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liberation man" who made ample use of nonviolent resistance in his quest for "social justice" for his "oppressed people."[9] But this liberation was always done in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Even James Cone, although he disagreed with King's nonviolent stance, acknowledged that he discovered in King what became the hermeneutical principle of his Black theology, the notion of liberation and the understanding of Jesus as a liberator.[10] But Martin Luther King, like his Black preacher forebears, was not a systematic theologian. His was a theology of action; a theology in context as Lonnie Edmonson and Archie Logan suggest. According to them, "Instead of starting with the data of contemporary concerns, the kind of theology in which King was involved begins with concrete human context--in this case, the dehumanization of the poor and the black--and maintains the concern for developing humanity as its central emphasis."[11] Indeed, "King's theology represents a move away from abstract speculation toward contextual application."[12]

The works previously cited point to the direction this dissertation will take. It will examine the writings of

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[9] Ibid., 16, 21-22.

[10] James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: Seabury, 1969), 117.

[11] Lonnie Edmonson and Archie Logan, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Theology in Context," Duke Divinity Review 40 (Spring 1975): 126.

[12] Ibid., 127.

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Martin Luther King to find out the impact of the Black tradition on his thinking, his principles of interpretation, the kind of theologian he was, and his application of theology in liberation preaching.

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CHAPTER 2

Influences on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Impact of the Black Tradition

Recent scholarship is confirming what some Western Blacks have long known--that there is a cultural and religious African continuum among New World Blacks. Of course, folklorists and others have often pointed out the African origin of the so-called black magic found among some Blacks in the New World.[1] These writers wrote from biased viewpoints dwelling only on the negative, but never mentioning the positive use to which magic was put, namely the securing of freedom.[2]

Roger Bastide points to one possible reason for this phenomenon as the European's penchant for writing about the apparently bizarre, something different. He asserts:

> "Until very recent years the students' main sphere of interest has lain in the non-European aspects of this cultural field; being soaked in our own culture, we are liable to notice those elements which diverge from it. We are better acquainted with the Bush Negro than with his urban counterpart. The Negro who belongs to the mystery cult and goes in for ecstatic trances we know; but what about those who are good Catholics, good Protestants or agnostics."[3]

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[1] Henry Mitchell, Black Belief (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 47-51.

[2] Ibid., 54.

[3] Roger Bastide, African Civilization in the New World (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 25.

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Bastide continues this line of thought by calling attention to the immense bibliography that is to be found on African folklore--the exotic and the picturesque--while so little has been written about the "various aspects of day to day life" of the African people.[4] For instance, much is known of African voodoo in New Orleans which was transported from Haiti. But little is known of the many aspects of Western African religion preserved in America which are comparable with our Judeo-Christian belief.

Three elements of West African beliefs are cited which have been preserved in the Black American culture: the omnipotence of God, the justice of God, and God's providence or sustenance.

John Mbiti, in his book, African Religions and Philosophy, informs us that among some West Africans, God is seen as Almighty. He said, "One of the names for God describes Him as 'the All-powerful' or the 'Almighty.'"[5] This attribute of God is not only understood as transcendence but also as imminence.[6]

Henry Mitchell says that this African belief in the omnipotence of God was a sustaining factor amidst the inhuman and life-destroying plantation slavery. With this

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[4] Ibid., 25.

[5] John S. Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy (New York: Praeger, 1969), 131.

[6] Ibid., 147.

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belief in God's omnipotence, the slave could be assured that, despite the hellish experience of slavery, "the whole world was in the hands of one powerful enough to handle it." Consequently, belief in the existence of that power was his only hope for the destruction of the slave system.[7]

Another aspect of West African religion that has survived among American Blacks is belief in the justice of God. Again, Mbiti says that African people consider God to be just. No matter what befalls them, they believe that God is always right. He observed that among Africans "the justice of God is felt or invoked often in judicial situations, taking oaths and pronouncing formal curses." And all of these are taken seriously by African peoples. God is seen as "the ultimate judge and He executes judgment without partiality."[8]

Of all the attributes of God, the justice of God was most pressed into service by the slaves and their descendants. They had ample reason to think of a just God, not in a theoretical manner, but in practice; namely, praying and hoping that the God of justice would one day destroy the galling institution of slavery. Thus, slaves saw their master's death as punishment by God.[9] When the slaves later learned the Scripture, they constantly made use of

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[7] Mitchell, 109.

[8] Mbiti, 38.

[9] Mitchell, 112.

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Biblical themes that suggest God's ultimate justice: "sowing and reaping," and "due season."[10]

Intuitively, certain of the judgment of the oppressor, the slaves sang, "I'm so glad, trouble don't last always my Lord . . ." Undoubtedly, with their masters in mind, they also sang, "Sinners will be running in that Great Day. Who shall be able to stand?"[11]

It is significant that the slaves and ex-slaves believed that a just God was working with them in their attempt to free themselves. In this connection, the convicted henchmen of Nat Turner's Rebellion were known to have declared "that they was going (dying) happy for that God had a hand in what they was doing."[12]

William Croft, the runaway slave, spoke for the rest of his brothers in chains concerning God's justice when he asserted, "There is, however, one great consolation in knowing that God is just, and will not let the oppressor of the weak, and the spoiler of the virtuous, escape unpunished here and hereafter."[13] That God was just and would bring retributive justice on slave masters was the general belief of slaves and freed Blacks. Thus, Gayraud

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[10] Ibid., 113-114.

[11] Ibid., 115.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Herbert Aptheker, Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 38.

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Wilmore rightly observes, "What both the slave churches of the South--'the invisible institution'--and the free churches of the North developed was a religion suffused with a sublimated outrage that was balanced with a patient cheerfulness and boundless confidence in the ultimate justice of God."[14]

All over Africa, people believe in the providence and sustenance of God. The Ovimbundu name for God bears this out clearly. It means "He who supplies the needs of His creatures." Mbiti says, "This is one of the most fundamental beliefs about God, and examples come from all over Africa. (God) provides life, fertility, rain, health, and other necessities needed for sustaining creation."[15]

Many West African people acknowledge the sustaining work of God. For instance, the Ashanti "consider God to be their Keeper, Guardian, Protector, and Preserver."[16]

In his book, Black Belief, Mitchell points out that every small fortune that came the way of the American slaves and ex-slaves was seen as the providence of a good God. He thinks this "habitual accentuation of the positive has maximized the support and strength which they (Blacks) could draw from each instance of God's providence."[17]

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[14] Wilmore, 19.

[15] Mbiti, 41.

[16] Ibid., 42.

[17] Mitchell, 133.

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Hence, Gustavus Vassa's slave observation in his slave narrative is apropos here. He states:

> I believe there are few events in my life which have not happened to many: . . . and did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great, but when I compare my lot with most of my countrymen [slaves], I regard myself as a particular favorite of heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life."[18]

The slaves brought with them these religious themes from West Africa and kept this world view after reaching the American soil when Christianity was introduced.[19] The coming of Christianity served to reinforce their lofty ideals about God because they were compatible to the Old and New Testament teachings about God. These themes were perpetuated in the Black Christian communities. Further, the nature of Black oppression in the U.S. society drives home such themes to the heart of every child who is reared in the Black community.

It is, therefore, significant that Martin Luther King, who was a product of the Black Church of America, trumpeted these themes in the interest of Civil Rights and found attentive ears among Blacks of all classes and positions. Contrary to what some students of King think, King did not function in a cultural and religious vacuum, but was

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[18] Gustavas Vassa, "The Life of Gustavas Vassa, The African," Great Slave Narratives, ed. Arna Bontemps (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 4.

[19] Mitchell, 126.

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influenced by Afro-American elements of yesteryears and of his day.

Although King admitted being influenced by philosophers and theologians such as Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, Brightman, and De Wolf, from them he was merely gathering building blocks to build on a foundation already laid by pillars of truth from his Black Church Culture.[20] To change the metaphor, these philosophies learned from Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University served only to sharpen the tools he had brought from his Black Baptist Church and the Black Community in Atlanta, Georgia. For, from his teen years, he had understood the injustice of segregation and knew that it was incompatible with the justice of God. King gives us a glimpse of his teenage thinking, "As a teenager I had never been able to accept the fact of having to go to the back of the bus or sit in the segregated section of a train."[21]

Thus, Martin Luther King, absorbed in the Black tradition of his people, could join his West African forebears and speak of an omnipotent God. King believed in a God who "is able to subdue all the powers of evil" and is "working through history for the salvation of man."[22] Surely the

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[20] Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 90-100.

[21] Ibid., 20.

[22] Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 100-104.

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God whom he worshipped "is not a weak incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil."[23]

Justice of God is one of the constant themes of King. Consequently, for him, "God is on the side of justice; the universe is on the side of justice." Therefore, one who struggles for justice is assured of "cosmic companionship."[24] With this grounding, King saw himself like the eighth century prophets, like Jesus and Paul, going all over the U.S. fighting against the injustice of segregation and Black oppression and seeking to plant the seeds of justice. For, as King states, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."[25]

King found comfort in knowing that we serve a God who "expresses his toughness in justice and wrath. . . ." Like his forefathers, he spoke of God who will utilize his all-powerfulness to secure justice for the suffering and the oppressed. Thus, in the sermon, "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," King says, "At times we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass and leave them withering like the herb."[26]

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[23] Ibid., 101.

[24] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," Christian Century 74 (Feb. 1957): 166-167.

[25] Martin Luther King., Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 78-79.

[26] King, Strength to Love, 7.

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Martin Luther King also re-echoed the story of God's providence and sustenance taught by his forefathers. In a sermon entitled, "Our God is Able," King spoke of the providence of God who "is able to sustain the vast scope of the physical universe."[27] King not only thought of a provident God who sustains the universe, but also a God who "is able to give us interior resources to confront the trials and difficulties of life."[28]

King looked on his survival amidst the fires of racial hate as providential. He recalled his experience in Montgomery when he was very fearful and was about to give up the struggle for racial equality, when God sustained him. After praying earnestly about his plight, King related:

> It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared . . . . God had given me inner calm. [29]

Liberation Themes Among Early Black American Preachers and Leaders: King's Interpretation a Continuity

Liberation from white oppression has been one of the chief functions of Black religion in America. This was

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[27] Ibid., 102.

[28] Ibid., 107.

[29] Ibid.

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true even in the time of slavery. Although little is known about the content of slave preaching when whites were not in the congregation, it must not be accepted, as some white writers reported, that slave preaching was otherworldly. As Gayraud Wilmore pointed out, such interpretation was based on half-truths of just how much the slaves were willing to tell whites about Black worship in their absence. In all probability, the slaves "were not about to tell the white people all they knew about the complicity of their preachers in revolutionary activity."[30]

It is a fact that the slave masters desired and arranged for otherworldly preaching among the slaves, with the intent that the slaves would not focus attention on the liberating elements of the Gospel. The following sermon preached in 1749 by a Reverent Thomas Bacon is typical of slave master-approved sermons:

> A second reason why you ought to serve God, is--Because you have souls to be saved. If you have nothing in this world but hard labor, with your coarse food and clothing, you have a place provided in Heaven, when you die and go into the next world, if you will but be at pains of seeking it while you stay here.
>
> . . . That is he who places every man in the station or rank which he holds in this world, making some kings, some masters and mistresses, some tradesmen and working people, and others servants and slaves.
>
> That everyone of us is obliged to do the business he sets us about, in that station in life which he hath been pleased to call us.[31]

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[30] Wilmore, 45.

[31] Harry V. Richardson, Dark Salvation (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 31.

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Despite such manipulative methods of preaching, the slaves held firm their beliefs that a just and omnipotent God would, in His appointed time, deliver them from that cruel slave system.[32] At times, some slaves openly resisted this distorted preaching. The experience of Charles Colcock Jones points up slave attitudes to such sermons:

> I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle of Philemon; and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismission, there was no small stir among them, some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others that it was not the Gospel; others that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.[33]

It is now known that slave preachers comprised the vanguard of the slave resistance movement. Many of these leaders were African conjurers or medicine men later turned preachers of liberation. Wilmore said that these slave leaders were "men of extraordinary intelligence and influence over their fellows (who) kept the pot boiling by relating slavery with the white man's immorality and freedom with the Black man's eternal salvation."[34] However,

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[32] Ibid., 28.

[33] Ibid., 29.

[34] Wilmore, 69.

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there must have existed an ultraconservative stream of slave preachers. This paper does not include the other-worldy preachers but emphasizes the abolitionist preachers who would influence King's thinking.

Slave preachers were greatly aided by such abolitionists' literature as the Appeal of David Walker (an ex-slave) and by the efforts of former slaves from the North. This body of literature constantly reminded the slaves that it was against nature and the will of God that they remain patient under slavery. Wilmore speaks of the impact of Northern Black support on the morale of the slaves:

> Through the distribution of such tracts and pamphlets in their Churches they came to know that there were Black brothers in the North who were prepared to join them with brains and brawn if ever the blow for freedom would be struck.[35]

Of particular significance is David Walker's Appeal, September 1829, which excoriated white American Christianity. He reminded the slaves that God would soon bring destruction to white Christian Americans who enriched the United States with the blood and tears of the Blacks. He admonished:

> Our God . . . will give you a Hannibal, and when the Lord shall have raised him up and given him to you for possession, O my suffering brethren! Remember the divisions and consequent sufferings of Carthage and Hayti . . . . The person who God shall give you, give him your support and let him go his length, and behold in him the salvation of

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[35] Ibid., 61.

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> your God. God will indeed deliver you through him from your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America.[36]

David Walker was no mountebank or visionary; he was a faithful member of the Methodist Church in Boston.[37] He wrote not out of hate but what he called the "very strict commandment of the Lord" in the face of the stark cruelty of slavery and slave masters.[38] His work is Christian and draws its justice themes from the prophets of the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. Consequently, it was not a political freedom document for Black people, but a book "dedicated to the Lord."[39]

Armed with such theological ammunition, the slave leaders and preachers would visit various plantations on Sundays. While their masters were worshipping by themselves, the slave preachers in their gathering would subtly move from the bondage of sin and deliverance in Christ to the bondage of slavery and the plans of the God of justice for their deliverance.[40] Thus, from early eighteenth century, whites were very suspicious of slave meetings and,

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[36] Charles M. Wiltse, ed., David Walker's Appeal, In Four Articles Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), 20.

[37] Wilmore, 55.

[38] Herbert Aptheker, ed., One Continual Cry; David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 138.

[39] Wiltse, 138.

[40] Wilmore, 46.

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particularly, slave preachers. It was the belief of slave masters that Black religion was closely associated with slave revolt. In this connection, Joseph Carrol's comment after a slave uprising in 1722 is worth noting:

> Sunday was a favorite day on which the slaves often planned outbreaks, because it was easy to get together on Sunday . . . the slaves were given a deal of liberty in assembling for religious worship. Hence the religious service was the great incubator where slave insurrections were hatched. . . ."[41]

Although we do not know exactly the content of slave preaching, it is evident that the slave preachers utilized the liberating elements of the Bible to offer hope to their oppressed brethren and resistance to white oppression. The ruling class' fear of Blacks congregating at night, especially for religious meetings, strongly indicates that Black preaching was a threat to the very existence of slavery. The report of Holt Richardson of King William County in 1789 mirrors this fear:

> I have appointed Patrollers to keep our Negroes in order to search all Disorderly houses after night & unlawful meetings & where they find a large quantity of Negroes assembled all night to take them up & carry them before a justice which has been done. . . .[42]

These suspect religious meetings gave birth to Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner.

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[41] Joseph C. Carrol, Slave Insurrection in the United States (Boston: Chapman & Grimes, 1938), 18.

[42] Cited by Wilmore from the Archives of Virginia Executive Papers, 5 Sept. 1789.

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Gabriel Prosser of Richmond, Virginia, saw himself as a type of Samson (Judges 15). He actually believed that from his childhood, God had called him as a deliverer of his people.[43] Thus, he set himself to institute on the American shores what Toussaint had created in the Caribbean--a Black nation free from the oppression of the whites. With his Bible-inspired mission, Gabriel planned the first slave revolt in the long history of slave revolutions on the mainland.[44]

Denmark Vesey was a brilliant religious man of South Carolina. He had purchased his freedom the very year of Gabriel's plot, 1800.[45] Influenced by Baptists and Methodists, Vesey espoused an interpretation of Scripture that had West Indian and African origin. He was an ardent Bible student who chose Joshua 6:20-21 as his favorite passage. The significant verses read:

> So the people shouted, and the priests blew the trumpet: and it came to pass when the people heard the sound of the trumpet that the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city every man straight before him and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city both man and woman, both young and old and ox and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.

It is now known that Vesey frequently used this Bible theme in his address to the freed Negroes of Charleston,

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[43] Carrol, 44.

[44] Wilmore, 75.

[45] Ibid., 76, 79.

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and it is strongly believed he likewise preached to the slaves on this theme. At these religious meetings he enlisted followers and used Bible stories to dignify his plan of insurrection against white domination.[46] The revolt, which was to take place July 14, 1822, was betrayed by a house slave and was brutally smashed.[47]

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that the newly formed African Methodist Church, headquartered in Philadelphia, was an accomplice in this conspiracy of 1822. All the leaders of the intended revolt were leaders of Hamstead, the A.M.E. Church in Charleston.[48] Many of these Church leaders were put to death and died without revealing other participants at the advice of Peter Poyas, the vice-commander. "Do not open your lips; die silently as you shall see me do."[49]

But it was left to Nat Turner to execute the most significant slave uprising in the history of America. Turner, too, was born a slave in a home which sponsored evangelical Christianity. The greatest influence on Turner was his grandmother and her Methodism. He grew up to be a slave preacher and was greatly impressed with the passages

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[46] Orville J. Victor, The History of American Conspiracies: A Record of Treason, Insurrection, Rebellion in the United States (New York: Torrey, 1863), 376-377.

[47] Carrol, 87-88.

[48] Ibid., 87.

[49] Benjamin Brawley, A Social History of the American Negro (New York: MacMillan, 1921), 139.

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of Luke 12:35, 39-40, 49-51. In sum, the passages suggest that "the messianic vocation that ushers in the Kingdom of prosperity and power is symbolized not by peace but by the sword." When later asked why he concentrated on these passages, Turner replied that it was the spirit of the prophets of the Old Testament he saw in these passages.[50] Like Vesey and Gabriel, Turner studied the Bible assiduously and meditated on its contents. He convinced not only his fellow slaves that God was with him but also some whites.

In 1828, Turner claimed to have received an unmistakable sign that he should prepare for his great work, the elimination of the "Serpent"--the symbol of slavery. From 1828 to 1831, Turner was busy preaching to his fellows in bonds that God had called him to lead them to freedom "upon a Christian basis."[51] On August 21-23, Turner and his cadre of slaves successfully launched their attack on the slave owners. Commonly regarded as terrorists, these men were Christian fighters for justice and preachers who drew their themes from the Bible and applied them to the problem of their day--slavery.[52] In important ways they were forerunners of Martin Luther King, Jr. In this connection,

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[50] Wilmore, 91.

[51] George W. Williams, A History of the Negro Race in America, ed. William Loren Katz, reprint (New York: Putman, 1968), 88-90.

[52] Wilmore, 97-101.

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Gayraud Wilmore suggests that the basis of Turner's resistant movement was the linking of Jesus with the prophets of the Old Testament. Wilmore writes:

> At the beginning of his ministry he had already perceived a close relationship, as did other slave preachers, between Jesus of Nazareth and the great prophets who called down the wrath of God upon his disobedient people and their enemies.

Wilmore continues:

> This is all the more remarkable when we remember that this interpretation was far from that of the missionaries. Jesus, for them, was the meek and mild examplar--the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world, whose obedience to His master, God the Father, was the accepted model of the Christian slave.[53]

Although Martin Luther King differed from these earlier Black leaders in method, his source of inspiration was the same, the purpose of his preaching was the same--the liberation of American Blacks from white oppression. The expectation of the Black masses in society was the same--the coming of freedom through the medium of Black charismatic leaders.[54]

Significantly, Wilmore acknowledges the continuity between early Black preachers and Martin Luther King in pointing out their recognition of the principles of the Kingdom preached by Jesus and of the Old Testament prophets of justice. His words were:

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[53] Ibid., 91-92.

[54] Ibid., 71.

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> In recognizing the meaning of Jesus and His kingdom in relation to the great prophets of justice in the Old Testament, Turner's reading of Scriptures adumbrated the Black theology of preachers from Henry Highland Garnet and Henry McNeal Turner to Martin Luther King, Jr. who understood Jesus as a protagonist of radical social change.[55]

Contribution of the Black Church Movement in the Struggle

A serious treatment of Black preaching must, of necessity, focus on the contribution of the Black Church in the United States. For a considerable length of time after the Civil War, Black congregations in the South, that came to be so by segregation, were under white control. White preachers often officiated at these Churches. It was not until Black preachers were called by these dominantly Black congregations that the situation began to change. The white ruling class again became fearful. Black preachers were persecuted and harassed. The whites insisted that Black preachers maintain the same discipline over the Black masses as the slave masters would have over Negro people. Hence, the Black preacher was constantly being watched. But the Black preacher played a double role in the community in order to help his people, and did so discreetly. Phillip Bruce's observation aptly portrays the role of the Black preacher in the South in the nineteenth century.

> The preachers of the Negroes are almost active politicians as a rule, but even when they are not, they have much political influence, for they constitute, individually the natural

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[55] Ibid., 92.

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> leaders of their race, being elevated to their clerical position, not because they were men of greater holiness of life or eloquence of tongue than the rest of their fellows, but because they have more energy and decision of character. Each one brings these qualifications to bear on all occasions of public agitation and from that coign of vantage, his pulpit, which thus becomes a rostrum, the religious doctrines enunciated from them, taking the color of his political principles just as, on the other hand, his political harangues have a religious echo. The two parts of minister and orator are played skillfully at one and the same time that it is impossible to distinguish them; and the affairs of the Hereafter are mixed in inextricable confusion. His church is thus converted into a political organization that is consolidated by religious fervor that pervades it, and propelled towards a single political and by a religious enthusiasm that expects to be rewarded spiritually for the performance of partisan duties. The preacher playing alternately upon both at once excites an emotional responsiveness that is prepared to obey his slightest injunctions; and he does not hesitate to turn this exalted state of feeling to the most useful account.[56]

In reference to this multi-faceted religion in the Black Community, Wilmore writes:

> White preachers have never made as rich a use and elaborate a use of religion as Black preachers . . . for the slave and their descendants, a religion that could unveil the reality of another world beyond "this vale of tears," and at the same time interpret what God was doing in history to redress the wrongs perpetuated against Black people, was an absolute necessity for survival.[57]

Such was the contribution of the Black Church and Black preaching which shaped Andrew Bryan, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Highland Garnet, Henry Turner and others.

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[56] Phillip A. Bruce, The Plantation Negro as a Freeman (New York: Putman, 1889), 73-74.

[57] Wilmore, 106.

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Andrew Bryan founded the first African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, 1788. The slave masters, fearing that he was fermenting insurrection, whipped and imprisoned him and his members and destroyed his thriving church. However, he was later exonerated and returned to his preaching.[58] According to Woodson, this congregation became the beacon light to the Negro religious life of Georgia.[59]

In 1787, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones broke away from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because of overt racism that raised its ugly head on a Sunday morning during prayer.[60] Allen and Jones left the church with a view of finding genuine Christian fellowship among themselves, which was not to be obtained at St. George's Methodist Church. After much harassment and many threats from St. George's and the Methodist Conference, Allen and Jones built a place of worship and fellowship. Allen stated the purpose of the building. "We intended it for the African preaching-house or Church."[61] In 1787, Allen and other Blacks founded the Free African Society which

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[58] Ibid., 106.

[59] Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington, D.C.: Associated Pub., 1921), 40-44.

[60] Richard Allen, The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 25.

[61] Ibid., 28.

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by and large was a Christian fraternity for Blacks in Philadelphia. Of course, it had moral rules and an interest in the promotion of religion, but was largely fraternal and included all religious denominations. The purpose of the Society is set out in the preamble:

> Whereas Absalom Jones and Richard Allen two men of African race, who for their religious life and conversation obtained a good report among men, these persons, from a love to the people of their complexion whom they beheld with sorrow, because of their irreligious and uncivilized state, often communed together upon this painful and important subject in order to form some kind of religious society, but there being too few to be found under the like concern, and those who were, differed in their religious sentiments; with these circumstances they labored for some time till it was proposed, after a serious communication of sentiments that a society should be formed without regard to religious tenets, provided the persons lived an orderly and sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.[62]

Later, Allen broke from the Society when it was leaning toward Quakerism. For Allen, "There is no religious sect or denomination that would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodist . . . and [that is] the reason the Methodist is so successful in the awakening and conversion of the colored people. . . ."[63] The African Society in 1790 resolved itself into an Episcopal Church with Absalom Jones as its first pastor in

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[62] Marcia Matthews, Richard Allen (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), 53.

[63] Allen, 29.

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1794. It took the name St. Thomas African Episcopal Church.[64]

In July 1794, Allen erected a church called Bethel. The influence of Allen and his Black Methodist Church grew rapidly. With the cooperation of like-minded pastors and members of Black Methodist Churches in New York and Maryland, Richard Allen and Daniel Coke of Baltimore led in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in April 1816. Allen was then appointed its first bishop.[65]

Richard Allen was a deeply religious man who told of his raising up "a society for forty-two members."[66] He also admonished his hearers to have "assurance of acceptance with God and an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven."[67] He was a "race man" who hated every semblance of slavery. He and other Northern Black preachers did everything they could to destroy slavery in their own way.[68] In this connection, Carol V. R. George makes an insightful observation concerning the effectiveness of Allen's method in dealing with the oppression of Blacks in the North and slavery in the South.

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[64] Wilmore, 115.

[65] Allen, 35.

[66] Ibid., 26.

[67] Ibid., 88.

[68] Wilmore, 132-133.

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> Instead of employing the most forceful rhetoric of a David Walker or Nat Turner, Allen chose to combat institutionalized prejudice through a variety of specific channels; he attacked the Colonialization Society and its program of sponsored emigration, he supported the Free Produce Society an organization that sold goods produced by free rather than slave labor, he arranged for the First National Negro Convention in 1830.[69]

It is evident that Allen's goal in the organization of a Black independent church was the providing of a theologically satisfying home for Black people.[70] There they could carry out their twin goals of "spiritual holiness and civil freedom."[71]

Henry Highland Garnet is remembered for his famous speech at the Ecumenical National Negro Convention in New York, 1843, when he addressed himself to the slaves of the United States. A few excerpts from this speech serve to show his conviction that slaves must free themselves at all costs. He told the slaves:

> Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. The diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, Neither God, Nor Angels, or Just Men Command You to Suffer for a Single Moment. Therefore it is Your Solemn and Imperative Duty to Use Every Means, Both Moral, Intellectual, and Physical that Promise Success.[72]

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[69] Carrol V. R. George, Segregated Sabbaths (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 6.

[70] Ibid., 7.

[71] Wilmore, 134.

[72] Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," Walker's Appeal and Garnet's Address, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 93.

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Garnet appealed to their manly pride, love of family, and patriotism:

> Look around you and behold the bosoms of your loving wives, heaving with untold agonies! Hear the cries of your poor children! Remember the stripes your fathers bore. Think of the torture and disgrace of your noble mothers. Think of your wretched sisters as they are driven into concubinage, and are exposed to the unbridled lusts of incarnate devils. Think of the undying glory that hangs around the ancient name Africa. . . . If you must bleed let it all come at once--rather die free men, than live to be slaves.[73]

His antislavery program was not adopted at the convention, but was printed and, subsequently, was very influential among both slaves and free Blacks.[74]

The forming of the A.M.E. and later A.M.E. Zion denominations ushered in a new and progressive era for the Black cause in the United States. The African churches were strongly opposed to slavery and prohibited slaveholder membership in their churches. The following antislavery resolution adopted at an A.M.E. Church Conference in 1840 shows the African churches' position on slavery:

> We the members of this conference, are fully satisfied that the principles of the Gospel are arrayed against all sin and that it is the duty of Christians to use their influence and energies against all systems that rudely trample under foot the claims of justice and the sacred principle of revelation. And whereas, slavery pollutes the character of the Church of God and makes the Bible a sealed book to thousands of immortal beings, therefore it is resolved, that we will aid by our prayers, those pious persons whom God has raised up to plead the cause of the

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[73] Ibid., 94.

[74] Wilmore, 131-133.

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> dumb, until every fetter shall be broken and all the men enjoy the liberty which the Gospel proclaims.[75]

Here the Black Church not only condemned slavery but committed itself to help in the destruction of the slave system.

Thus, Benjamin Quarles praised the Black Church for its stance on social issues in the 19th century. After pointing out some of the Church's weaknesses, he writes:

> But from the viewpoint of social reform, the distinguishing mark of the Negro Church was its independence from white control. Its money came from Negroes. Hence it could speak out on such issues as slavery without fear of losing members or offending someone in the South.[76]

In this connection, Wilmore is right when he declares:

> Born in protest, tested in adversity, led by eloquent and crusading Black preachers, the Black Church was, during most of the nineteenth century, the cutting edge of the freedom movement among both slaves and free men, and thereby a living witness against the ambivalence and faithlessness of most of white Christianity during that period.[77]

W. E. B. Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the greatest intellectuals the United States has produced; and he was a Black man. He was the recipient of degrees from Harvard University and the University of Berlin. He flourished in the latter part

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[75] James A. Handy, Scraps of A.M.E. History (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Church, n.d.), 141.

[76] Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 82.

[77] Wilmore, 132.

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of the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth century. Du Bois articulated the American Black's dual ethnic identification--on the one hand with America and on the other with the Black race.

In his critique of Booker T. Washington and his association with the Niagara Movement and N.A.A.C.P., Du Bois demonstrated his desire for Blacks to be integrated into the larger American society. He advocated race unity and self-help among Blacks.

Du Bois believed that Blacks everywhere were victims of the color-line. In 1900, at a Pan-African Conference held in London, Du Bois observed that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line. He stated that there is danger in denying half the world's people--the darker races--the opportunity of sharing in modern civilization. According to Du Bois, in the light of justice and freedom held up before Europe for a thousand years in Christian civilization, it would be grave inconsistency for the Black world to be exploited and ravished by Europeans and white Americans.

In 1910, Du Bois left Atlanta University and joined the staff of the N.A.A.C.P., which he helped to found in 1909, to give his energy and talents to the uplift of Blacks. His assignment was director of research and editor of N.A.A.C.P.'s magazine, The Crisis. This medium gave Du Bois the opportunity to crusade for the rights of the impoverished Black masses.

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In his twenty-four years as editor of The Crisis, the journal became the chief voice of interracial protest and reform. In the April 1916 issue, Du Bois outlined a program which was a mixture of N.A.A.C.P. platform as well as his own personal views on public affairs. In his demand on white America, Du Bois said the Negro demands:

1. Equality in the modern realm of human culture--a culture that white Americans have inherited and have not significantly improved. In a people's culture they show real pride of race and decent self-respect.

2. The Negro calls for political freedom for taxation without representation is tyranny.

3. Industrial freedom. The Negro is exploited by capitalists and labor unions, so that he represents the most exploited and voiceless class of laborers in the United States.

4. Social equality. The state and the church have joined hands in the segregation of Negroes.

Du Bois then challenged the N.A.A.C.P. and people of goodwill to implement what he called a "constructive effort" which can be summed up as follows: (1) economic cooperation, (2) a revival of art and literature, (3) political action, (4) education, and (5) organization.[78]

In his speech honoring Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr. showed his kinship of spirit with Du Bois when he declared:

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[78] Francis Broderick and Augustus Meier, eds., Negro Protest in the Twentieth Century (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 54-58.

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> Dr. Du Bois recognized that the keystone in the arch of oppression was the myth of inferiority and he dedicated his brilliant talents to demolish it.

Continuing in the same vein of thought, King said:

> The truths he revealed are not yet the property of all Americans but they have been recorded and arm us for our contemporary battles.

King was particularly referring to Du Bois' monumental work, Black Reconstruction in America. Obviously, Martin Luther King, as an intellectual and activist, saw Du Bois as a model for his "contemporary battles." In this connection, King challenged his audience:

> . . . He did not content himself with hurling invectives for emotional release and retire into smug passive satisfaction. History had taught him it is not enough for people to be angry--the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force. It was never possible to know where the scholar Du Bois ended and the organizer Du Bois began. The two qualities in him were a single unified force.[79]

As Du Bois lived a dedicated life to the uplift of oppressed Blacks, so did Martin Luther King. Both were brilliant doctors of the best universities in the land, yet both were activists for Black uplift. As King spoke of the unification of scholarship and organizing ability in Du Bois, so it can be said that the spirit of a scholar and social activist was a single unified force in Martin Luther King, Jr.

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[79] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," Freedom Ways Magazine, 23 (Feb. 1968): 104-110.

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Social and Political Developments of the 1940s and 1950s in the Shaping of King

Nonviolent Movement of A. Phillip Randolph

The forties and fifties saw the rise of brave men and movements in the American society that gave struggle for racial equality among Blacks and whites a much needed push. These movements were destined to influence the mind of Martin Luther King, Jr. as he sought for methods to right the wrongs carried out on Blacks in the so-called "land of the free and brave."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) which was accused, with some justification, of representing the interest of middle class Blacks and some liberal whites was now broadening its appeal. Frazier observes:

> This organization had gradually broadened its appeal to Negroes and lower strata of the negro population were rallying to its support. The last indication of this fact was the existence in 1946 of 1,200 branches of the Association in forty-three states with a total membership of 520,000. Thus about one out of every twenty-six negroes in the United States is a member of the association today (1949).[80]

Another civil rights-minded organization of the forties was the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. In this organization, whites and Blacks cooperated for broad democratic aims. The main purpose of the conference was

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[80] Franklin E. Frazier, The Negro in the United States (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 537.

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"the improvement of the economic, social, political, and educational condition of all the people of the South." It particularly appealed to the Blacks because of its open attack on the principle of segregation. In 1947, its sponsored public meetings in the South were not segregated between Blacks and whites--a further proof of this organization's anti-segregation stance.[81]

But of all the social and political developments of the forties and fifties which were significant to Blacks in American society prior to December 1955, three events stand out in bold relief:

1. The success of A. Phillip Randolph's causes through the method of nonviolence.
2. The formation and subsequent activities of C.O.R.E.
3. The 1954 Supreme Court's decree on education.

According to Arna W. Bontemps, Black Americans out of the depressing thirties were not willing to listen to any organization purporting to speak for their betterment. However, one of the voices to which they listened was A. Phillip Randolph's. His "had the accents of a prophet or a saint," altough he showed no particular liking for organized religion.

Earlier, Randolph had edited a monthly Black-oriented magazine called Messenger. The stated policy of the magazine was his also:

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[81] Ibid., 538.

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> We do not accept the doctrine of the old, reactionary Negroes that the negro is satisfied to be himself, because of our recognition that the principle of social equality is the only sure guarantee of social justice.

During the years of World War I, young Randolph, through pen and voice, scoffed at Woodrow Wilson's slogan "making the world safe for democracy." For him the statement was hypocritical when Negroes were being lynched, Jim Crowed, disfranchised, and segregrated in America. However, his objection to America's entrance into the war was due partly to his pacifist philosophy. Like Martin Luther King after him, Randolph stated his nonviolent posture on wars, "I was fundamentally opposed to wars. I am a pacifist so far as national wars are concerned."[82]

For all this Randolph was called "the most dangerous Negro in America." But it was winning the bargaining rights for porters and maids employed by the Pullman Company through his union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, that won him the admiration of Black leaders. This contract between his union and Pullman Company meant pay increases to the tune of millions of dollars, together with other benefits such as reduced mileage and shortened work time for eight-thousand workers.

During World War II, Randolph turned his interest of the social and economic uplift of the Black man to the national scene. Randolph was disgusted with the failure of

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[82] Arna Bontemps, 100 Years of Negro Freedom (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1961), 237-241.

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defense contractors to include Negro workers in the defense program. To bring pressure on government to intervene and change this situation, Randolph thought of a plan to have 10,000 Black people march on Washington.

Writing to the Pittsburgh Courier, a Black newspaper, Randolph summoned Black people:

> Let us march 10,000 strong on Washington D.C. Only force can effect enforcement and Negroes are getting nowhere in national defense. The whole national defense stinks with race prejudice, hatred, and discrimination.[83]

The March on Washington Movement soon gained widespread popularity. It is worthy to note that Randolph stated the reason for using the march method in concepts that were later to be used amply by Martin Luther King. Randolph stated that he was not:

> . . . Unaware of the significance and value of every form of agitation and organization in the fight for Negro rights, including news articles and editorials in the press and programs of the radio, dramas and the movies, but (their organization) was committed to the thesis that none of these agencies can and will project the cause of the Negro into the mainstream of public opinion as effectively as direct action, mass action and,of course, always nonviolent action.[84]

Randolph convincingly reassured his people that the march on Washington would have two values: (1) to place human beings in physical motion which can be felt, seen, and heard, shaping public sentiment; and (2) to give the

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[83] Ibid., 242.

[84] Ibid.

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little Negro the opportunity to help free his race.

The N.A.A.C.P., the National Urban League, the Black churches, Black civic groups, Black trade unions, and Black educational movements gave the plan their blessing. President Franklin D. Roosevelt became concerned. As a result of the plans for the demonstration, the president arranged a meeting between himself and the representatives of the March on Washington Movement. Out of this meeting with Randolph and others, the president issued, on June 25, 1941, Executive Order 8802. "The order reaffirmed the policy of nondiscrimination in government and forbade contractors handling government orders to discriminate against workers because of "race, creed, color, or national origin."[85]

This nonviolent pressure on the government of the United States won for Randolph national acclaim. In this regard, the observation of Arna Bontemps is apt:

> In the significant breakthrough which recognition for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters represented and in the Jericho like victory achieved by the March on Washington Movement before a step had been taken by the demonstrators, Randolph had worked two miracles in the space of four years and each touched the lives of Negroes in all parts of the nation.[86]

In 1942, King was too young to comprehend Randolph's threat of civil disobedience based on Gandhian tactics. But Randolph's attempt in 1947 to lead a movement of protest against a segregated army had stirred thousands of

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[85] Frazier, 536.

[86] Bontemps, 243.

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other Black college students. However, Randolph's crowning achievement was his efforts in assisting Martin Luther King to organize and actualize King's famous march on Washington.

Not only did the man Randolph, whom his admirers began comparing with Gandhi, help to shape King's thinking, but he also became King's older-statesman adviser. It is no secret that King's famous march on Washington was suggested to him by A. Phillip Randolph.[87]

Formation of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1942

The Black freedom movement in the United States was given a shot in the arm when some seminary trained antiwar young people of Chicago in the 1940's banded together for peace discussions and racial integration plans. Out of this small group was to evolve the action-packed organization known as C.O.R.E.

The Congress of Racial Equality was formed in June 1942. The pacifist interracial organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation, was the quasi parent of C.O.R.E. F.O.R. was established during World War I with a particular interest in pacifism and race relations, and numbered several Blacks among its officials. When, in 1940, the noted pacifist and radical reformer, A. J. Muste, became F.O.R.'s chief executive, this organization moved beyond philosophical resistance to war to the experimentation of

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[87] Jervis Anderson, A. Phillip Randolph (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 322-325.

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nonviolent direct action for social justice in American society. Among the "Peace Cells" into which F.O.R. members were organized, there was one established at the University of Chicago in October 1941, which was intensely interested in applying Gandhian principles to race problems. It was from this race-relations team of about twelve members that the first C.O.R.E. group emerged as the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality.[88]

The six people who founded C.O.R.E. were all pacifists. Four were white and two Black. Three of thes served jail terms as conscientious objectors. All of them had been involved in the Christian-pacifist student movement of the thirties. They all sahred a deep commitment to inter-racialism.

This race-relations team met every Saturday, studied War Without Violence, a description of Gandhi's philosophy and methods, and discussed ways of applying Gandhi's ideas to resolve the American race problem. They were skeptical of the programs of N.A.A.C.P. and the National Urban League and, believing that racism "must be challenged directly without violence or hatred yet without compromise," the Saturday study group prepared themselves for action. An opportunity for action was in the immediate surroundings of the university where property owners refused to rent their houses to Blacks. Taking their cue from the example of the

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[88] Augustus Meier and Elliot Rudwick, C.O.R.E. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 4.

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Gandhian cooperative communities called "Ashrams," the racial team or cell established Fellowship House, an interracial men's cooperative, to challenge the restrictive rent policies in the university area. It all started when whites secured an apartment and soon after a dozen men, including three Blacks, moved in. The owners did not resist their plan and they considered this six months occupancy as "a successful example of nonviolent direct action against residential segregation."[89]

Inspired by the success of this and similar activities in April 1942, fifty people met to form "a permanent interracial group committed to the use of nonviolent direct action opposing discrimination."[90] Most of the fifty chartered members were white university students mainly in the Federated Theological faculty at the University of Chicago. The others were Blacks except for one Japanese college graduate. About half of this group were pacifists. The pacifists not only founded C.O.R.E., but held most of the offices and decidedly influenced C.O.R.E's philosophy in the early years.

Thus began this nonviolent direct action interracial group. But it was not until June 1942 that the name Committee of Racial Equality was chosen, and not until 1943 that "Congress" was inserted in the place of Committee giving

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[89] Ibid., 5-6.

[90] Ibid., 8.

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C.O.R.E. its present name.

The nonviolent direct action philosophy and interracial composition of C.O.R.E. are of interest to this thesis, for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was to follow C.O.R.E.'s example in admitting whites into its organization and committing itself to nonviolent direct action in the elimination of racial segregation in the United States.

It has been suggested that the twin ideological beliefs that undergirded C.O.R.E.'s organization were Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and interracialism. The following excerpts from C.O.R.E.'s statement of purpose unequivocally convey these beliefs:

> C.O.R.E. has one purpose--to eliminate racial discrimination.
>
> C.O.R.E. has one method--interracial nonviolent direct action.
>
> C.O.R.E. asks its members to commit themselves to work as an integrated group: . . . by renouncing overt violence, in opposing racial discrimination and using the method of nonviolent direct action; which refuses to cooperate with racial injustice; which seeks to change existing practices by using such techniques as negotiation, mediation, demonstration and picketing; which develops a spirit of understanding rather than antagonism. C.O.R.E. members find a unique field of action: in working against discrimination in public places such as schools, restaurants, churches, etc., in attempting to attack the more basic social, economic, and political problems of discrimination as they are manifested in such forms as the restrictive covenant system.[91]

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[91] Elliot Reddick and Francis Broderick, Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 239-240.

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C.O.R.E.'s Action of Discipline also declares a nonviolent method which confronts "without hate." However, this direct action should always be accompanied by a spirit of goodwill toward the offender, an approach which is aimed at changing both his action and attitude.[92]

As nonviolent direct action was one of the cornerstones of C.O.R.E., so interracialism was another. C.O.R.E. had one method to eliminate racism--"interracial-nonviolent method." That was part and parcel of C.O.R.E.'s philosophy and method. Interracialism was so ingrained in the C.O.R.E. ideology that Bayard Rustin of C.O.R.E. criticized Randolph's all-Black March on Washington Movement.[93]

James Farmer, one of the founders of C.O.R.E., was so dedicated to the principle of interracialism that he accused Black nationalism as a setback to racial integration which was trying "to break down social and economic barriers of segregation while nurturing mental barriers of segregation." "That," he said, "is precisely what the nationalists are doing; we cannot destroy segregation with a weapon of segregation."[94]

Although C.O.R.E. spread to many more cities in the country, it was not to become a national force until the 1960's. But it saw itself as an action group, not a

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[92] Meier and Rudwick, 9-10.

[93] Ibid., 11.

[94] Ibid.

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talking club and, consequently, showed its muscles in the search for racial justice. Thus, twenty-one C.O.R.E. members, an interracial group, staged a successful "sit-in" at Jack Sprat's restaurant in May 1942 and protested its refusal to serve Negroes. Again in 1947, Bayard Rustin and George Houser, C.O.R.E. leaders, led a group through the upper South to break up illegal discrimination practices in Southern transportation. This project was called "Journey of Reconciliation." From their numbers, several arrests were made among the riders on Greyhound and Trailways, but the arrests served as significant legal test cases.[95]

C.O.R.E., more than any other Black-oriented civil rights organization, with its nonviolent direct action set the pace for Martin Luther King's nonviolent philosophy and practice. It pointed the direction in which the Southern Christian Leadership Conference should go.

Thus, in 1960, when four Black students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged a spontaneous sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter for its refusal to serve them lunch, it was not coincidental that Dr. Simpkins, the N.A.A.C.P. representative, phoned C.O.R.E. for immediate help instead of contacting the N.A.A.C.P. He called C.O.R.E., "Because I was certain they were ready and able to give aid to the students."[96]

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[95] Meier and Rudwick, 13, 33-36.

[96] Louis E. Lomax, The Negro Revolt (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 122.

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1954 Supreme Court Decision

Re: The Inequality of

Separate Education

If C.O.R.E. touched the lives of educated activists and some pacifist liberal whites, the Supreme Court decision (Brown vs. Board of Education) was destined to impact millions of Americans, white and Black.

Sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, has correctly stated that segregated school systems have placed a limit upon Black children's participation in American culture. According to Frazier, "They have been the means of maintaining the social subordination of the Negro, stamping him as inferior. . . . In recent years, the segregated school has come to be one of the main barriers to the realization of equal opportunity in American life."[97]

But then came Monday, May 17, 1954, and the case of Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka. The Supreme Court ruled that state-imposed school segregation was unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause.[98] Blacks all over America felt that this ruling would dispel the long night of segregated school systems in the South. Lomax said the Supreme Court school segregation had an electrifying impact on the Black

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[97] Frazier, 449.

[98] Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, Civil Rights and the American Negro (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 417.

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community in the United States. It came "just as the Negro was at the breaking point." Negro soldiers had just come home from a war against Hitler's race madness only to face incredible insults and police brutality at the hands of the nation they risked their lives to defend.[99]

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell expressed the sentiments of millions of American Blacks when, in reference to the court decision, he said, "This is a great day for the Negro. This is democracy's finest hour."[100]

Blausteen and Zangrando put the court decision in its proper perspective:

> No document in the history of Civil rights and the American Negro approaches the significance of the unanimous 1954 Supreme Court opinion in Brown versus Broad of Education at Topeka. . . . All state-imposed racial discrimination was struck down as unconstitutional per s under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, climaxing more than two centuries of litigation on the legal status of the Negro. The Brown case marked the opening of a new era in legal struggle for Negro equality.[101]

The significance of the ruling can be seen when it is remembered that, at the time of the Supreme Court decision:

> Segregation in the schools was required by law in seventeen states and the District of Columbia. In this area there were over 8,000,000 white and 2,500,000 Negro school children enrolled in approximately 35,000 white schools and 15,000 Negro schools.[102]

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[99] Lomax, 73.

[100] Ibid., 74.

[101] Blaustein and Zangrando, 414-415.

[102] Ibid., 415.

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Although the Court decision has been circumvented by Southern racist legislators, both at the regional and national levels, the seed of integration in national public education was sown. The Court decision formed the base for better worded future decisions by the Court for desegregation in American schools. It also provided the ground on which N.A.A.C.P. lawyers, who had successfully pleaded Brown's case, would challenge many Southern school boards which sought to carry on segregation in defiance of the Supreme Court's decision.

If the average Black American saw the importance of the 1954 Supreme Court's decision, then Martin Luther King, who graduated the same year from Boston University with a Ph.D. degree and chose to work in the deep South among Blacks, must have been profoundly impressed with the Court's decision and its implications for his Black people all over this land.

King's Immediate Environmental Influence

Ministerial Heritage

It was the Black Church that produced Martin Luther King. The Black Church was forced at all times to be sensitive not only to the spiritual but also the crying social needs of its community. It was the ministry of the Black Church that gave King a model for ministry.

Authentic ministry in the American Black Church has always followed the prophetic model accentuating liberation from social injustices, namely racism and poverty. It was

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in this type of church and ministry that Martin Luther King was born and nurtured. The Black Church made the King of the fifties and sixties the minister with an intense social conscience, yea, a prophet of social justice.

As the events set in motion by brave Blacks of a former time--forebears of all Black religious leaders in America--prepared the soil in which Martin Luther King was to grow, so the movements of daring Black leaders of the 1940's and 1950's were to point the direction in which he was to travel to awaken the conscience of America on the vexed race problem.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was the son and grandson of social activist preachers of Atlanta, Georgia. King's grandfather, A. D. Williams, was one of the pioneer leaders of the Atlanta N.A.A.C.P. branch, whose parent body was partly engineered by W. E. B. Du Bois, the brilliant Black Atlanta-based professor.[103] From the pastorate of the prestigious Ebenezer Baptist Church, Williams led a citizen's group which forced the city of Atlanta to build a Negro public high school. It came about when Blacks defeated a bond issue which made no provisions for educational facilities for Negroes. When The Atlanta referred to the Negro protesters as "dirty and ignorant," Williams led a boycott of this paper which led to its eventual death.[104]

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[103] Lerone Bennett, What Manner of Man (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), 10.

[104] Ibid., 12.

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King's father continued in this tradition in the thirties and forties. It must be remembered that the senior King in his youth rebuffed the insult of his mother's white employer when she closed a front door in his face and offered him a sandwich through a partially opened back door. He had also drawn down the wrath of his father's white landlord when he showed up the landlord's intention to rob his father's cotton crop. He later fled the plantation and its system and went to Atlanta, studied at Morehouse, and married the daughter of A. D. Williams, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church.[105]

The senior King later succeeded A. D. Williams at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Continuing in the tradition of his father-in-law, he headed a citizen's committee which organized Atlanta's first suit for equalization of teacher's salaries. The elder King soon became a powerful leader in the Negro community, serving on boards of institutions such as Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and the National Baptist Convention. He also was very influential in the local N.A.A.C.P. branch and the Atlanta Negro Voter's League. Because of his stance as a racial leader, he frequently received threatening phone calls and abrasive letters from the Ku Klux Klan. It was in this climate that Martin Luther King, Jr. was born and raised.[106]

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[105] Ibid., 6-7.

[106] Ibid., 12-16.

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From an early age the racist climate of the South began to needle King. Three incidents of racism in his youth stand out. When he was about five or six years old, his closest playmates were two children of a white neighborhood grocer. But, after they had gone to two different schools, one white, the other Black, a problem began with his friends' parents. King later relates:

> But suddenly when I would run across the street after school to compare notes, their mother would tell them they couldn't play any more. She said they were white and I was colored. At first she made excuses, but finally she told me. I think I cried, but anyhow I rushed home and asked mother about it.[107]

He related how his mother explained to him as best she could the slave system and its aftermath. Then she told him, "You are as good as anyone."[108]

When King was about eight years old he accompanied his father to a downtown shoe store. They sat down in the first empty seats in the front of the store, just to be told they would only be served in the rear of the store. Angered, his father replied, "We'll either buy shoes sitting here, or we won't buy shoes at all." King reported that as they walked out of the store his father muttered, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it."[109]

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[107] Ibid., 15.

[108] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 18.

[109] Ibid., 19.

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King recalled an insult he and his schoolmates suffered in a bus on returning from an oratorical contest in Georgia. He and his teammates took the first seats available on a bus, only to be abused by the driver when they refused to move at his request. The enraged driver called them "Black sons of bitches." Looking back on this incident, King said, "It was a night I will never forget. I don't think I have ever been so deeply angry in my life."[110]

As a teenager, King never accepted segregation in public facilities. His commentary on being seated behind a curtain in a dining car shows his utter contempt for segregation, "I felt as if the curtain had dropped on my selfhood." Separate public facilities "did something to my sense of dignity and self-respect," King said.[111]

Growing up in this racial climate, it is not surprising that King rejected racism outright. He further tells us of some of the other factors that shaped his thinking:

> I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it. I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched, and had watched the Ku Klux Klan on its rides at night. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in courts. All these have done something to my growing personality. I had come perilously close to resenting all white people.[112]

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[110] Lerone Bennett, 19.

[111] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 20-21.

[112] Ibid., 90.

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King's early years found him not only having concern for racial equality, but also for economic equality. When a freshman at Morehouse College, he was already concerned about economic justice. Thus, four years later he wrote in the college newspaper, the Maroon Tiger, that most of his fellow students think "education should equip them with the proper instrument of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses."[113]

Out of concern for the masses was why King worked two summers against his father's wishes. As the son of a very influential pastor in Atlanta, King could have worked at one of several Negro-owned businesses, but he chose to work as a laborer. Both summer jobs were laborious and back-breaking, but he chose these because he wanted to experience the problems of the common laborers. His aim was to "learn their plight and feel their feelings."[114] In reference to his work place and experience, King said:

> Here I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the negro. Through these early experiences, I grew up deeply conscious of the varieties of injustice in our society.[115]

In these experiences a seed was planted which was to germinate and grow into an oak-like crusader for justice and brotherhood in American society.

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[113] Lerone Bennett, 29.

[114] Ibid., 28.

[115] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 90.

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King was born in the parsonage of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, nurtured by this faith, impressed by the preaching and lifestyle of his father, and yet he shied away from the ministry, preferring to become a doctor. After resisting for some time his calling to the ministry, he finally decided to be a minister to the joy of his father. This decision was greatly aided by observing the intellectual strength of ministers like Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey, who were freed from emotionalism. These social and religious threads were woven into the fabric of King's thought and preaching.

Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College

King's biographers said that it was Benjamin Mays whose image as a minister made King see that a Black minister does not have to be only hand clapping and emotional, but can be intellectual as well. The young King conceived in Mays what a Christian minister could be. To King, his sermons were so intellectually stimulating and socially relevant that, after chapel services, Martin would await Mays to ask him questions. Recalling those days, Mays said of King, "He had a balance and maturity then that were far beyond his years and a grasp of life and its problems which exceeded even that life."[116]

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[116] William R. Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1968), 13.

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But what was the "image" of the man whose life greatly impressed King to become a minister of the Gospel? Benjamin Mays was a distinguished educator and pastor. Among his administrative positions were dean of the Howard University, School of Religion, and president of Morehouse College. He authored The Negro's Church, The Negro's God, and Disturbed About Man. As a crusader against injustice and racial discrimination, Mays brought a lawsuit against the Southern railway in 1941 for segregating him in a dining car, a practice outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1950.

Mays exposed the stark hypocrisy of some white ministers when he answered Billy Graham's suggestion that there is love between the races in the South. "Having been born a Negro in South Carolina," Mays said, "I am in a better position to speak out on this point than Mr. Graham." He continued:

> It was in the South where I was slapped momentarily simply because I was a Black rascal trying to look too good; it was in the South where I was almost lynched while riding in a Pullman car; and it was in the South where I had to step backward out of a dining car to keep from being beaten up from the rear.[117]

But perhaps nowhere is the image of the man seen, whose life significantly shaped King's more clearly, than in his sermons, "Eulogy for Dr. Martin Luther King" and "I

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[117] Marcus H. Boulware, The Oratory of Negro Leaders, 1900-1968 (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 188-191.

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Am Disturbed About Man" (from which the book is titled) that we will examine. There are four aspects of these sermons that point to areas of Mays' thinking that Martin Luther King could have emulated.

The sermons revealed Mays' belief in a personal God and His goodness to men. In the sermon, "I Am Disturbed About Man," he affirmed his faith in God:

> And even if the sun should explode or the moon grow too cold for the earth to maintain life, my faith in God would remain unshaken. Nothing can happen in this world to shatter my faith in God. I believe in God.

This concept of the goodness of God shone through his "Eulogy for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.":

> We have assembled . . . to give thanks to God that he gave to America, at this moment in history, Martin Luther King, Jr.[118]

Not only was Mays' faith in a personal God similar to King's, but his concept of man as good and evil. Mays felt that, although man was made in the image of God, "it seems in the image of the devil" he was made also. Man, for Mays, was "potentially rising to the divinity of God, capable also of descending to the level of the devil." Yet, for Mays, there was hope for man when he learns the ways of the Lord, thus paving the way for "brotherhood, justice and peace."[119]

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[118] Benjamin E. Mays, Disturbed About Man (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), 89.

[119] Ibid., 97.

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Mays' sermons demonstrate understanding of history and the sense of mission of a social prophet. In the Eulogy he said King was not ahead of his time, "Every man is within his star. Each in his own time." As if he was back in Morehouse giving a chapel talk aimed at shaping lives, Mays declared:

> Each man must respond to the call of God in his lifetime and not in somebody else's time. Jesus had to respond to the call of God in the first century A.D., and not in the twentieth century. He had but one life to live. He couldn't wait . . . Gandhi and Nehru couldn't wait for another time . . . Martin Luther King, Jr. dying fighting for justice for garbage collectors, none of these are ahead of their time. With them the time was always ripe to do that which was right and that which needed to be done.[120]

In King's love of words, dramatized for meaningful purposes, he must have been enamored with Dr. Mays' oratory.

In eulogizing Martin Luther King, Jr., Mays drew upon the oratory of Black American preachers when he said:

> Truly God is no respecter of persons. How strange! God called the grandson of a slave on his father's side . . . and said to him. Martin Luther speak to America about war and peace, about social justice and racial discrimination, about the obligation to the poor, about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war.[121]

Evans E. Crawford points up the subtle and profound oratorical insights in Mays' sermon when he writes:

> Strategically Mays' "How strange!" subtly indicated that God had once again called a person from the least-likely place to speak a

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[120] Ibid., 13.

[121] Ibid., 10.

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> prophetic word. He could have been more blunt and made explicit that King was Black and from a victimized race. Instead he took a narrative approach and in doing so gave expression to what has become a characteristic feature of preaching in the Black community. He put God and King in intimate conversation and in a sentence or two gathered up the whole sweep of King's life and work.[122]

Besides the narrative method of Black preaching, Mays made ample use of rhetorical rhythms and eloquence in the moving tribute to the late Martin Luther King:

> Surely this man was called of God to do his work. And if Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century B.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet in the twentieth century. If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther was called of God to prophesy in his time. If Hosea was sent to preach love and forgiveness centuries ago, Martin Luther was sent to expound the doctrine of nonviolence and forgiveness in the third quarter of the twentieth century. If Jesus was called to preach the gospel to the poor, Martin Luther was called to give dignity to the common man.[123]

Benjamin Mays and Martin Luther King, Jr. were of the same school in mental, social and religious outlook. No wonder the senior so influenced the junior for good, and the junior, King, so impressed the senior, Mays, that he dedicated his book of sermons, Disturbed About Man, "To the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., who too was disturbed about man."[124]

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[122] Evans E. Crawford, Jr., "Benjamin E. Mays: Renosant Rebel," Journal of Religious Thought 32 (Spring-Summer 1975): 125.

[123] Mays, 13.

[124] Ibid., 1.

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Contributions of King's Intellectual Mentors

Walter Rauschenbusch

Many are the men and ideas which largely contributed to Martin Luther King's philosophical and theological postures. Of some of these, King made passing reference. But the following men and ideas, as King acknowledged, were the salient molders of his intellectual stance:

Walter Rauschenbusch
Mahatma Gandhi
Reinhold Niebuhr
Boston University's Personalism
Howard Thurman

Graduate work at Crozer Seminary and Boston University exposed King to some of the sharpest minds in American liberal theology. One of the most persuasive and famous liberal theologians under whose influence Martin Luther King came at Crozer Seminary, was Rauschenbusch of the Social Gospel Movement. As a result of an intensive study of the prophets, Jesus, and the early church, Rauschenbusch thought he found a profound concern for the social dimension of life running throughout the Old Testament.

With his discovery of a deep sense of social awareness in the prophets, Rauschenbusch opted for what can be called the prophetic model of ministry. Rauschenbusch claimed that Jesus stood firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and Christianity. For example, the Old Testament often speaks of the wicked rich man and the blessed poor man. This theme was repeated in the Magnificent where the lowly are exalted and the high and mighty

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humbled. Christianity became the heir of the prophetic tradition mainly through the Jewish-Christian communities that comprised the radical wing of the early church.[125] He believed that the classic expressions of the prophetic spirit in the New Testament are to be found in the Synoptic Gospels and the Epistle of James. Rauschenbusch called the latter "one of the most democratic books of the New Testament."[126]

One of the corollaries of the prophetic model of religion in the thought pattern of Rauschenbusch is the indivisibility of Judeo-Christian religion and ethics. For him, a believer in the social gospel needs not have a pietistic lifestyle if his spiritual life has an ethical outcome. Righteousness is what God demands and an ethical life is the appropriate act of worship. The elimination of social injustice is the goal of the Christian. In the primitive church, Christianity espoused the prophetic conviction that service to God is right relations with one's fellowmen and not ritual and ceremony. According to Rauschenbusch, if Christianity had maintained this original emphasis, "it would have been an almost inconceivable leap forward in social and religious evolution."[127]

A second aspect of the prophetic model is the

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[125] Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 98.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid., 176.

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affirmation of the social character of religion. In support of this stance, he argued that it was the community of Israel that produced prophets. Prophets were not isolated or autonomous individuals, but were an integral part of the covenantal community. They were not produced by religion that focused mainly on the individual. Such individualistic emphasis in religion may produce saints, missionaries, pastors, and scholars, but seldom prophets.[128] For Rauschenbusch, individualistic religion is inadequate for "it lacks that vital interest in the totality of human life which can create a united and harmonious and daring religious concept of the world."[129]

With Martin Luther King's sensitivity for social justice, it is not surprising that the study of Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement helped to shape his ideas on the crying social need of American society. King later confessed that he had found in Rauschenbusch's thoughts the theological bases for his social concern.

> . . . Rauschenbusch gave to American Protestantism a sense of social responsibility that it should never lose. The Gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his spiritual well being but also his material well being.[130]

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[128] Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: MacMillan, 1922), 194.

[129] Rauschenbusch, Christianity, 335.

[130] King, Strength to Love, 138.

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Like Rauschenbusch, King espoused the prophetic model. He agreed with Rauschenbusch that if the prophets and Jesus had limited their vision to an individualism like that of modern Christianity, their chief contribution, ethical monotheism, would have been lost. The Prophets of Israel influenced King more than any other part of Scripture, except the Sermon on the Mount. The prophetic model is evident in King's public addresses and writings. He frequently called for a social revolution in values based on the Beatitudes and Isaiah 40. Over and over, he also quoted the famous passage from Amos 5:24, "But let judgment run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

When King was criticized for disrupting the peace between the races in the South by boycotts, King, with the insight of Hebrew prophets, explained what Jesus meant in the words, "I have not come to bring peace but a sword." He aptly described his critics idea of peace as false peace. King then saw his mission in a similar way:

> Wherever I come division sets in between justice and injustice. I have come to bring a positive peace, which is the presence of justice and love."[131]

Church and Social Responsibility

Rauschenbusch advocated that the church should follow the teachings of Jesus and become the agent of change. He saw major conflicts between the teachings of Jesus and United States capitalistic institutions. He taught that

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[131] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 40.

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the church would be more effective in combating the evils of society if it would abandon its indirect approach and make a direct assault on unjust institutions.

Rauschenbusch explained that as repentance is required of the individual, so there must be repentance of the community for social sin, for evil has a structural character. He felt that traditional pietist Christians did not understand the depth of sin in the human heart and the consequent intransigence of the sinful social structures. As a result, Rauschenbusch said, Fundamentalists "sometimes reverently bow before one of the devil's spiderwebs, praising it as one of the mighty works of God."[132]

The emphasis of Rauschenbusch on the church's relationship to society has found an echo in King. He called for the church to assume its responsibility in breaking social barriers set up between people of different races.

> It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and break the mores when necessary. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable must confronting the church today."[133]

Thinking that racism is the greatest problem in American society, King lamented the shameful fact that the church has been "an accomplice in structuring racism in the architecture of American society."[134] He continued in

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[132] Rauschenbusch, Christianity, 349.

[133] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 205.

[134] King, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 96.

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the same vein to describe a "faithless church." For him, the segregated church in the American society has become "an echo rather than a voice, a taillight behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies rather than a headlight guiding men progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding."

Behind King's belief that the church has a responsibility for the social needs of the world is a central theological posture--the unity of body and soul. For him, Christianity has a double heart thrust:

> On the one side, it seeks to change the soul of men and thereby unite them with God; on the other, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed.[135]

The central theme for Rauschenbusch was the Kingdom of God. Not only was it the "lost social ideal of Christendom, it was also the first and most essential dogma of the Christian faith."[136] Hence, for Rauschenbusch, it was both a religious and social doctrine:

> Religious in that it is divine in its origin, progress, and consummation . . . and is the continuous revelation of the power, the righteousness and love of God. It was social in that the kingdom is always both present and future . . . always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action: that promotes the progressive unit of mankind.[137]

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[135] King, Strength to Love, 97.

[136] Robert T. Handy, ed., The Social Gospel in America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), 256.

[137] Ibid., 256-257.

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The doctrine of the kingdom led Rauschenbusch to conclude that Christianity itself is essentially corporate and communal in character. For him, the chief purpose of Christianity is "to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God."[138] He equated the kingdom with transformed regenerated society. In the words of his classic definition of the kingdom, "Humanity organized according to the will of God,"[139] and "The organized fellowship of humanity acting under the impulse of love."[140]

Although King criticized Rauschenbusch for what he termed "superficial optimism," it is evident that he is indebted to Rauschenbusch for his dram of the "Beloved Community." Smith and Zepp point out correctly:

> The vision of the Beloved Community was the organizing principle of all King's thought and activity. His writings and his involvement in the civil rights movement were illustrations of and footnote to his fundamental preoccupation with the actualization of an inclusive human community.[141]

Martin Luther King seldom referred to the kingdom of God, but John H. Cartwright is right in suggesting that

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[138] Ibid., 257.

[139] Rauschenbusch, Christianity, xiii.

[140] Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974), 44.

[141] Ibid., 119.

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King's Beloved Community is synonymous with Rauschenbusch's Kingdom of God.[142]

King's dream of the Beloved Community has many elements of Rauschenbusch's Kingdom of God. His vision of the Beloved Community has been summarized as "A dream of equal opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed . . . where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character. . . ."[143]

However, Martin Luther King was not only impressed with Rauschenbusch's "Kingdom of God," but he benefited from the social reformer's call for a return to the principle of Judeo-Christian religion which is indivisibly joined to ethic. This position makes for service to God in relation to one's fellowmen rather than the performance of rituals and ceremonies.

Rauschenbusch's stance that the Gospel deals with the totality of man informed King's posture that any religion which is only interested in the souls of the oppressed and is not concerned with the bodies which are affected by slum-dwellings is a do-nothing religion in need of new life.

King is also indebted to Rauschenbusch for stating that unjust institutions are guilty of corporate and

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[142] John H. Cartwright, "The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Essays in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. John H. Cartwright (Evanston, IL: Leiffer Bureau & Religious Research, 1971), 6.

[143] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," Y.M.C.A. Magazine, Dec. 1960: 6.

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institutional sin. For Rauschenbusch, the church must call for the repentance of these institutions.

King accepted the prophetic model of Rauschenbusch. With these theological insights, King sought to transform the social structure of America with the Gospel. America and Civil Rights are better because of these emphases.

Mahatma Gandhi

Not only was King impressed with Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel, but with Gandhi's nonviolence clothed in the garments of love.

Although at Morehouse College King had read Thoreau's "Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience" and was fascinated with its emphasis on refusal to cooperate with an evil system, it was not until he was enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary that he was introduced to Gandhian thought. This introduction came in a speech on the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. The speech was so electrifying to King that, upon leaving the meeting, he bought six books on Gandhi's life and work.

King was particularly moved by Gandhi's philosophical and methodological stances in his encounter with British might in the struggle for Indian independence. Two Gandhian concepts that impressed King come to the fore: Satyagraha and Ahimsa.

The word Satyagraha is a compound word denoting "clinging to truth, holding fast to truth, insistence on

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truth."[144] For Gandhi, Satyagraha is "Truth-force . . . which excludes the use of violence."[145] Gandhi taught, "To me truth is God and there is no other way to find truth except the way of nonviolence."[146]

However, Gandhi soon moved from a purely ontological position on Satyagraha, or to one which joined ontology, to ethics. For instance, Truth in the March to the Seas in 1930 meant the basic rights of Indians to possess their salt and manufacture it as they saw fit.

Truth, too, was the right of every Indian, irrespective of caste, to walk on public roads through the village and by the temple. Behind these and other campaigns of Gandhi were the fundamental rights of a people for self-government. For Gandhi, such rights point to the ultimate source of Truth.[147]

The Satyagraha Truth, "Truth is God" concept of Gandhi, was not only ontological but resolved itself into a moral and social instrument in freeing a people from religious inertia and British colonialism. The truth of this is seen in Gandhi's statement in Young India, ". . . Religion that takes no account in practical affairs and

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[144] R. R. Diawaker, Satyagraha: The Power of Truth (Hinsdale: Henry Regnery, 1948), 1.

[145] John V. Bondurant, Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1958), 16.

[146] Ibid., 18.

[147] Smith and Zepp, 50.

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does not help to solve them is no religion."[148]

Ahimsa. Gandhi, like other true Hindus, "want to see God, face to face." But for Gandhi, "the God, I know is truth. For me the only certain means of knowing God is nonviolence, Ahimsa-love."[149] The full force of Ahimsa is "action on the refusal to do harm."[150] In explaining the real meaning of Ahimsa, Gandhi said:

> I accept the interpretation of Ahimsa namely that it is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil doer. But it does not mean helping the evil doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love the active state of Ahimsa requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dis-associating yourself from him even though it may offend him. . . .[151]

The inseparable combination of truth and love form the nucleus of Gandhian thought. According to Gandhi:

> Without Ahimsa it is not possible to seek and find Truth. Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. . . . Ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within reach and so Ahimsa is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means we are bound to reach the end sooner or later.[152]

Gandhi's view of Ahimsa clearly points up that he was familiar with Jesus' teaching of agape, love:

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[148] Bondurant, 110.

[149] Ibid., 20.

[150] Ibid., 23.

[151] Ibid., 24.

[152] Ibid.

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> Ahimsa (love) really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbor an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy. . . .[153]

Again, "love never claims, it ever gives; love suffers, never resents, never revenges."[154]

It must be clearly understood that in the practice of nonviolence Gandhi was not suggesting any compromise or tolerating any weakness on the part of the Indian nation.

> I am not pleading for India to practice nonviolence, because she is weak I want her to practice nonviolence being conscious of her strength and power.[155]

Nonviolence calls for suffering, not weakness but strength. Nonviolence:

> Does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire . . . .[156]

Yet, all of these goals would not come without suffering in one's own person. This suffering would be a chosen substitute for violence by the Satyagraha--one who practices nonviolence. However, this suffering enables those who suffer and enriches the whole world because of their sacrifice.

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[153] Ibid., 24-25.

[154] Ibid., 112.

[155] Ibid., 26.

[156] Ibid., 27.

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The employment of Satyagraha in the nationalist movement in India included noncooperation, civil disobedience, jail-going, fasting and others, but all were carried out by means of Ahimsa.[157]

Satyagraha and Ahimsa were not new in the Indian religious and social culture, but the genius of Gandhi infused these with new life. Thus, the insight of Bondurant is apropos:

> The especial contribution of Gandhi was to make the concept of Ahimsa meaningful in the social and political spheres by moding tools of non-violent action to use as a positive force in the search for social and political truths. While calling upon illustrations from Indian mythology, Gandhi transformed Ahimsa into the active social technique which was to challenge both political authrority and religious orthodoxy.[158]

King and Nonviolence. What Louis Fischer in his book, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, said of Gandhi was also applicable to Martin Luther King. "Gandhi's religion cannot be divorced from his politics. His religion made him political. His politics were religious."[159] Like Gandhi, all of King's social and political positions came out of religious and theological convictions. But these two religious and ethical giants drew from different well-springs of spirituality. Smith and Zepp's observation on this regard is apt.

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[157] Erik H. Erikson, Gandhi's Truth (New York: Norton, 1969), 408-418.

[158] Bondurant, 112.

[159] Louis Fischer, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 103.

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Although King's religious presuppositions were drawn from Christian theology and ethics, his explication of nonviolence drew freely on both the thought and example of Gandhi and the level of strategy and tactics.[160]

Martin King always quoted profusely from Gandhi but in his first book, Stride Toward Freedom, he gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to Gandhi for providing him with the method to liberate his oppressed people from the structures of racism:

> Gandhi probably was the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force. Love, for Tandhi, was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for months. . . . I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.[161]

In structuring his principles of nonviolence, King drew from many sources: some of the teachings of Jesus, the Black experience in America, and others. But Mahatma Gandhi evidently made the greatest contribution to King's philosophy of nonviolence.

In Martin Luther King's thinking, the first thing about nonviolent resistance is that it is not a method for cowards, "It does resist." Nonviolence is the way of the strong man. It must not be mistaken for passive

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[160] Smith and Zepp, 67.

[161] Ibid., 97.

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nonresistance to evil, "It is active resistance to evil."[162] For him, nonviolent resistance is reconciling and community-building. It "does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." In this, King was thinking of the Black-White situation in America. He felt what was needed was not a polarization of the races, but integration of both. His vision of the aftermath of nonviolence is the "beloved community."163

Suffering is an integral part of nonviolence. The practitioner of nonviolence must be willing to accept violence if necessary in his resistance of evil, "not persons doing evil" but never to inflict it. King's rationale for advocating suffering is that it is ennobling, transforming and redemptive. He does not only preach an external nonviolence, but one which avoids both external and internal suffering. The nonviolent resister will refuse both from shooting or hating his opponent. For at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love.

According to King, nonviolent resistance is predicated on the conviction that some divine guide is on the side of justice. In the struggle for justice the one who practices nonviolent resistance has "cosmic companionship."[164]

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[162] Ibid., 102.

[163] Ibid., 102-103, 106.

[164] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," New South, Dec. 1961: 5-8.

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King operated on the premise that at the center of nonviolence is the ethic of love, agape--"understanding, creative, redemptive, goodwill to all men."[165]

It is of interest to examine the Code of Discipline that Gandhi drew up for those who wanted to practice Satyagraha by the means of nonviolence--Ahimsa. The following are some of the points emphasized by Gandhi:

(1) Harbor no anger but suffer the anger of the opponent.

(2) Do not submit to any order given in anger, even though severe punishment is threatened for disobeying.

(3) Refrain from insults and swearing.

(4) Protect opponent from insults or attack, even at the risk of life.

(5) Do not resist arrest. . . .

(6) If taken to prison, behave in an exemplary way.[166]

Here there are common threads that run through the works of Gandhi and King. The Code of Discipline when matched with King's principles of nonviolence points up some of them:

(1) The avoiding of external or internal violence.

(2) The willingness to bear suffering.

(3) The willingness to go to jail.

(4) The determination to stand courageously for what one believes is right.

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[165] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 104.

[166] Bondurant, 39.

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Reinhold Niebuhr

For King, the reading of Reinhold Niebuhr's works served as a corrective to the all-pervading optimism he found in Rauschenbusch and Gandhi. However, the interpreters of King's thoughts tend to play down Niebuhr's contribution to Martin Luther King in the shaping of his theology and social ethics. On the contrary, King acknowledged Niebuhr's impact on his mind when he encountered Niebuhr's works during his final year at Crozer Theological Seminary. King confessed that he "became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically every thing he wrote."[167]

It must be remembered that King had already immersed his mind in Gandhian thought and Rauschenbusch's liberal theology. Hence, his reference to the reading of Moral Man and Immoral Society that made him begin "to question some of the theories that had been associated with so-called liberal theology" could be directly referring to Rauschenbusch's emphasis on the Social Gospel.[168] King then pinpointed what he thought was Niebuhr's main contribution to contemporary theology, ". . . He has refuted the false optimism of a great segment of Protestant liberalism."[169]

While Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were leading a move

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[167] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 97

[168] King, Strength to Love, 135.

[169] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 99

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to reconstruct theology in Europe, Reinhold Niebuhr was the leader of the American school of theologians who sought to make theology more potent yet still rational. The work of the latter group was called Christian realism.

Man: Image of God. The salient doctrine of Christian realism was the interpretation of the nature of man. For Niebuhr, the source of man's uniqueness is that he was created in the image of God. Therefore, man must be understood from "the standpoint of God, rather than the uniqueness of his rational faculties or his relation to nature."[170] Man is a part of nature and is distinguished by his rational thought. However, these factors do not make for man's uniqueness. Niebuhr sees man's uniqueness in the imago dei. In this image of God lies the capacity for infinite self-transcendence. This is the source of man's uniqueness, Niebuhr argued. Advocating this viewpoint, he wrote:

> It is the quality of the human spirit . . . to lift itself above itself as a living organism and to make the whole temporal and spatial world, including itself, the object of its knowledge.[171]

The human faculties by which man is self-transcendent are imagination and memory. Memory helps to look in the past and present and profit from mistakes and wisdom. Through the use of imagination, man can plan for the future.

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[170] Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, one vol. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1947), 13.

[171] Ibid., 162.

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Self-transcendence makes man choose between alternatives, criticize himself and his institutions in the light of universal values. But this transcending of himself "leads him inevitably to the search for God who transcends the world."[172]

Because man's institutionalized sinful acts such as racism and greed disrupt community, there must be some restraining power on the egoism of man in both his individual and social relationships. Niebuhr sees this needed restraint as democracy. Here is his often-quoted statement, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination makes democracy necessary."[173]

King, in dealing with the nature of man, makes use of Niebuhr's dialectical method of reasoning, rejecting an either/or position for a both/and stance. He deplored the "superficial optimism of liberalism concerning human nature" as well as the pessimism of neo-orthodoxy. King then concluded:

> An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both.[174]

Again in this sermon, "What is Man," King rejected "pessimistic materialiam" and "optimistic but atheistic

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[172] Ibid., 165.

[173] Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Scribner, 1953), xi.

[174] King, Strength to Love, 136.

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"humanism," but agreed with those who are seeking to be a little more realistic about man and wish to reconcile the truths of both.[175] The latter group's assessment of man "seeks," according to King, "the Christian" view of man. These words point to his indebtedness to Niebuhr's The Nature and Destiny of Man.[176]

Another characteristic of human nature is the spiritual quality. He is a being of spirit. Although man is in nature yet he is above nature; he is in space and time yet he transcends them. Man can do what the lower animals cannot do. For example, man can think a poem and write it; he can think a symphony and compose it; he can think a great civilization and produce it. By his ability to reason, his power of memory and his gift of imagination man transcends time and space.[177]

The Christian doctrine of man, for King, sees man as a part of nature with a good body. King points out that here Christianity differs from Greek thought. Christianity always sees God's creation as good, while the Greeks see the body of man-matter as evil. "Christianity . . . contends that the will, and not the body, is the principle of evil." Realistic doctrine of man is concerned about man's physical and material well-being because it knows

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[175] Ibid., 88.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid., 90.

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that man cannot live without bread. King's unity of body and spirit is mirrored in this significant statement:

> As Christians we must think not only about mansions in the sky, but also about the slums and ghettos that cripple the human soul, not merely about streets in heaven flowing with milk, but also about millions of people in this world who go to bed hungry at night.[178]

In Niebuhrian language, King turns to man as sinner. He argues that man collectively sometimes sinks lower than the lower animals in barbarity. Recalling Niebuhr's book title, King said:

> We see the tragic expression of immoral society in the doctrine of white supremacy which plunges millions of black men in the abyss of exploitation.[179]

Niebuhr's concept of what he called the historicity of reason immensely affected King's thoughts. By this phrase, Niebuhr says that history proves that man has always used his reasoning to protect his own interest. Niebuhr observes, "Even the most rational men are never quite rational when their own interests are at stake."[180] Thus, privilege groups will use the most subtle and specious arguments to protect their special privileges.[181]

Drawing from Niebuhr's analysis of man's egoism that makes this reasoning serve to protect his vested interest,

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[178] Ibid., 89.

[179] Ibid., 91.

[180] Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Scribner, 1932), 44.

[181] Ibid., 117.

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King in reflection said:

> I came to see that the superficial optimism of liberalism concerning human nature is darkened by sin. The more I thought about human nature, the more I saw how our tragic inclination for sin encourages us to rationalize our actions. Liberalism failed to show that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason devoid of the purifying power of faith can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.[182]

Humankind--Sinner. That man is created in the image of God is not the final word of man's nature. Man is also sinner. Niebuhr reasons that since man is free to choose man tends to put himself at the center of the universe. Man forgets that he is not only free but bound. This tendency to put himself at the center of the universe leads man into self-love rather than love of God. Man's principle of self-determination should be found in the will of God since he was created in the image of God. When man seeks self-determination in any finite factor such as race, class or nation, self is distorting his nature. Sin then is man's refusal to accept his finitude.

From this philosophical position, Niebuhr moves to ethics. The love of self to the exclusion of God leads to the exclusion of other people. Thus, in man's social relationships, he attempts to subordinate other selves to his will by resorting to unrestrained power. The result, man's sinful nature, is demonstrated in widespread acts of injustice. Man's sins become structured in social institu-

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[182] King, Strength to Love, 136.

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tions and, consequently, perpetuate injustice in society.

Power. Nowhere does King show his debt to Niebuhrian thought more evidently than in his understanding of power. In Niebuhr's analysis of power, the relationships between social groups are mainly political not ethical. Social relationships are determined more by possession of power than by the moral claims of a group. Privileged classes possessing power always resist change for they are the beneficiaries of social injustice. Power always continues to exploit weakness until it is challenged by counter-vailing power. In Niebuhr's views, social groups with power and special privilege never give up any of their advantages. They have to be wrested from them. This is why religious idealism can only moderate the brutal and anti-social elements of the powerful.[183]

Having studied Niebuhr's insights on these ethical issues, King remarked that he was keenly aware of the complexity of human motives and of the relationship between morality and power. "These elements in Niebuhr's thinking helped me to recognize the illusions of superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of false idealism."[184]

King had a position on power similar to Niebuhr's. King agreed with Niebuhr that power is necessary. He

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[183] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 233-234.

[184] King, Stride Forward Freedom, 99.

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advised the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to give priority to the study of the levers of power. He had come to see that many of the problems in race relations had their origin in economics. He said that his association with church men and business men in the South taught him this painful truth. "In the South business men act much more quickly from economic considerations than do church men from moral consideration."[185]

Learning from other business and church contacts, King arrived at Niebuhr's position on privileged groups. King concluded, "Privileged groups, historically have not volunteered to give up privileges."[186]

The more King learned about economic power and morality and human nature, the less he believed that moral persuasion was the only strategy for social change. Thus, like Niebuhr, King came to believe that it is a "fallacious notion that ethical appeals and persuasion alone will bring about justice." This does not mean, King argued, "that ethical appeals must not be made. It simply means that those appeals must be undergirded by some form of constructive coercive power."[187]

In sum, Niebuhr's theology served as a "helpful corrective for a sentimental liberalism." But King did not

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[185] Ibid.

[186] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King," Playboy 12 (Jan. 1965): 128.

[187] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 128-129.

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accept Niebuhr's theology uncritically for he could say of Niebuhr, ". . . I came to see more and more of the shortcomings of his position." Niebuhr's greatest contribution to King's thought was on the question of man's nature. The following statement points to this contribution:

> While I still believed in man's potential for good, Niebuhr made me realize his potential for evil as well. Moreover, Niebuhr helped me to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil.[188]

Boston University's Personalism

As has been suggested, Crozer Seminary was the place Martin Luther King met some of the great thinkers of American liberal theology and Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. But Boston University School of Theology was to deepen the personalistic philosophy he learned from George Davis at Crozer Seminary.[189] Some of the most outstanding exponents of personalism at Boston University were Harold De Wolf, Edgar S. Brightman, and Albert C. Knudson.

Brightman and De Wolf made such an impact on King in the formulation of his theology that he later said of them:

> Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy--the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality--finite and infinite--is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and

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[188] King, Stride Forward Freedom, 99.

[189] Smith and Zepp, 99.

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> philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.[190]

According to Brightman, "personalism is the belief that conscious personality is both the supreme value and the supreme reality in the universe."[191] For the personalistic philosophers, personality is the only category to describe God, the supreme cause of the universe and the only perfect personality. Consciousness and personality characterized the supreme Being. Personalists conceive the universe as a society of persons and the central and most creative person is God.

Personalistic Themes in the Thinking of King. Three major themes traceable to personalism run in the writing and public addresses of King. These themes can be treated under the following subjects:

1. The Personal God of love and reason.
2. The inherent worth of the personality.
3. The moral law of the cosmos.

The Personal God of Love and Reason. The God of personalism is not only transcendent but immanent. He is both free and personal, but creative and moral.

When personalists say that reality can best be understood in terms of "personal" spirit, mind, will, love and

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[190] King, Stride Forward Freedom, 100.

[191] Edgar S. Brightman, Nature and Values (Nashville: Abingdon, 1945), 113.

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reason, they want to make it clear that personality cannot be defined correctly in the categories of space and time. Personality is not a "psycho-physical organism." One cannot see the essence of personality. One cannot likewise see ultimate reality, the Supreme Person. But, according to Brightman, the ground of all reality "is supremely rational and a supremely loving person."[192]

Again, Brightman thinks "God is a spirit, a being, to will to love, to control the ongoing of the universe by rational purpose."[193] He argued that there is ample empirical evidence to support the belief in the existence for such a Being. The supporting evidences are: (1) the universe is characterized by order and purpose, and (2) history shows the gradual realization of cooperation and benevolence. For Brightman, both of these facts are evidence of the work of a Supreme mind whose purpose is the actualization of values. Brightman reasons, "Value is inherently a personal experience, and if the cosmic source of value is itself a value, it must be a person realizing ideals."[194]

The personalists who influenced King contended that they saw two major attributes of a personal God, namely

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[192] Ibid., 140.

[193] Edgar S. Brightman, A Philosophy of Religion (New York: Prentice Hall, 1940), 226.

[194] Edgar S. Brightman, An Introduction to Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt, 1951), 279.

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love and reason. Both of these are fundamental universal principles--values which would result in persons living together cooperatively and harmoniously. When these universal norms, reason and love, are sought as "fixed ends," they produce unity and peace.[195]

In his doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," King criticized both scholars' concept of God and affirmed the omnipotence and love of God. His criticism reflected the tenets of Boston University's Personalism.

King's discussion of Tillich's view of God as Supra-Personal was a defense of personalism. Here is King's contention:

> Certainly it seems more empirical to ascribe personality to God than to ascribe supra-personality to him. In the world of experience the basic source of personality production and sustenance has been personality. Now when we are confronted with the fact of personality production and sustenance on a cosmic scale, why not ascribe the source to cosmic personality? It would be better by far to admit that there are difficulties with an idea we know--such as personality--than to employ a term which is practically unknown to us in our experience.[196]

Although Wieman and Tillich allow for the goodness and love of God, they deny the personality of God. Contrary to

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[195] Smith and Zepp, 107-108.

[196] Martin Luther King, Jr., A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, Ph.D. Diss., Boston Univ., 1955 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1977), 269.

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their thinking, King saw God as a personal being of infinite love and limitless power and the creator and sustainer of the universe. King argued, "Christianity affirms that at the heart of reality is a Heart, a loving Father who works through history for the salvation of his children."[197]

King's most potent statement of his belief in a personal God came in the wake of threats on his and his family's lives as he carried out his hazardous task as a civil rights leader.

> The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in a personal God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying "Lo, I will be with you". . . . I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship.[198]

Inherent Worth of Personality. The personalistic philosophy is concerned not only with respect for the "Divine Personality" but respect of the self and other human beings. The Divine Person can always be respected for what he always is ". . . while human beings are not

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[197] King, Strength to Love, 94.

[198] Ibid., 141.

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to be respected for what they are, but for what they may become."[199] Here Brightman may be referring to man's potential to reflect the "Divine Person." He is more explicit in holding to the sacredness of the human personality when he says, "Every person is unique and every man is an indispensable man in a personalistic universe."[200]

Another dimension of personalism's emphasis on the worth of the person is what Brightman called "spiritual liberty." His concept of freedom is not in the sense of political democracy or freedom of choice but of spiritual values. This type of spiritual liberalism makes for the development of one's potential to the experiencing of worth and dignity. For Brightman, this freedom is experienced in building life on the basis of spiritual values. The truth shall make you free.[201]

The motif of the inherent dignity of man is one of the strongest in King's writings. King believed that through the process of creation by God, man has inestimable worth because he reflects the image of God. He asserted, "Judeo-Christian tradition refers to this dignity of man in the Biblical term Image of God. 'The Image of God' is universally shared in equal proportions by all men."[202] King

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[199] Brightman, Nature and Values, 150.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid., 164.

[202] King, Where Do We Go, 97.

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also believed that at the heart of Western political and religious thought is the principle that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. For King, human worth does not lie in the greatness of a person's intellect, his racial origin or his social position, "But rather man's worth lies in his relatedness to God."[203] King concluded that in the final analysis, says the Christian ethic, "every man must be respected because God loves him."[204]

King's conviction in the inherent worth of the personality provided the theological and philosophical basis for his criticism of segregation. He held the view that segregation is sinful because it is born of pride and hatred. He argued:

> The undergirding philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and all the dialectics of logicians cannot make them lie down together.[205]

Furthermore, he believed that segregation is basically immoral because it treats people as means to an end. All men are children of God; therefore, they should be "treated as ends and never as mere means."[206]

One of King's criticism of communism was based on the

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[203] Ibid.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid., 100.

[206] Ibid., 97.

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inherent worth of the person. Totalitarian communism relates people to the state of things rather than the status of person. These systems, according to King, "depersonalize the potential person and . . . desecrate what he is."[207] True democracy also is "person-oriented and not thing-oriented." It puts emphasis on the value of the human personality. If democracy was taken seriously then Americans would not "be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them."[208]

Moral Law. King made ample use of the concept of moral law, a concept he formed through his understanding of personalistic phylosophy. Brightman said of the moral law in the universe:

> Idealists hold that moral experience points to an objective moral order in reality, as truly as sense experience points to an objective physical order and most idealists believe that the objective existence of both orders can be understood rationally only if both are the activity or thought or experience of a Supreme mind that generates the whole cosmic process and controls its ongoing.[209]

Moral law is an universal principle out of which man should make his decision and is a manifestation of ultimate reality. Brightman sees a direct relationship between the God of the universe and the moral law. A God that is

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[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid., 180.

[209] Edgar S. Brightman, Moral Laws (Chicago: Abingdon, 1933), 286.

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all-powerful and all-knowing, but devoid of moral concern, could not be the object of religious faith. Religious faith is mainly concerned with the moral character of God. Thus, the moral nature of the universe presupposes a moral author. In this regard, Brightman reasons:

> If religion be defined as cooperation between man and his God, expressed both in worship and in conduct of life, then two implications follow at once. First, that God is regarded as the embodiment of the moral ideal, and, secondly, that he is viewed as the very source or creator of a moral order in the universe.[210]

King's social milieu and love of the prophetical model made personalism's ideas on moral law in the universe appealing to him. Despite the hate and hardships in the work of civil rights, King continued his work courageously because he believed God would finally triumph over injustice and racism. "God," he believed, "is able to conquer the ills of history. . . . He has placed within the very structure of his universe certain absolute moral laws."[211]

According to King, Black people would be given their freedom not because it is politically expedient but because the moral law demands it, for God acting in history makes love and justice victorious. King declared:

> There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history, his wonders to perform."[212]

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[210] Ibid., 264.

[211] King, "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," 80-89.

[212] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 69-70.

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The Exodus event provided King with a lesson of how God is working in history to bring about justice. The destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea points to the fact that evil cannot prevail against God. With faith in the working of God in the universe, King writes:

> A Red Sea passage in history ultimately brings the forces of goodness to victory and the closing of the same waters marks the doom and destruction of the forces of evil. . . . All of this reminds us that evil carries the seed of its own destruction. . . . It can go a long way, but then it reaches its limits.[213]

Howard Thurman

One of the most significant intellectual mentors of Martin Luther King is Howard Thurman. Thurman, born in Daytona Beach, Florida, was a distinguished Black theologian and mystic who wrote twenty-two books and lectured in hundreds of educational institutions. Among the important posts which he held were: dean of Rankin Chapel and professor of theology at Howard University; dean of Marsh Chapel and minister-at-large of Boston University; and pastor and co-founder of the interdenominational Fellowship Church of San Francisco. His preaching and writings were so influential that in 1953 Life magazine selected him as one of the twelve "Great Preachers" of this century.[214]

J. Deotis Roberts named Thurman among the Black intellectuals "who laid the ethical foundations for King's

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[213] King, Strength to Love, 63.

[214] James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," Theology Today 43, no. 1 (April 1986): 10.

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work. Yet, King never acknowledged Thurman and many other Black intellectuals as his mentors. Roberts suggests the reason for this omission:

> King, in his account of his intellectual development, does not pay adequate respect to Black thinkers who prepared the way for him. At the time when he wrote, most Black scholars would have claimed respectability by quoting white sources; why should he be the exception?[215]

Lerone Bennett, one of King's biographers, said that King read or reread Howard Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited (1949) after the Montgomery bus boycott. Bennett said that, while he was interviewing King in 1956, he noticed a copy of Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited in King's briefcase.[216]

Other students of Black American thought suggest that Thurman "sowed the seed" of nonviolent suffering in the mind of Black Americans. However, it is undoubtedly clear that Thurman had an indirect influence in introducing King to the nonviolent ethic. After Thurman returned from India where he was greatly influenced by Gandhi, he urged Mordecai Johnson of Howard University to make a pilgrimage to India and hear Gandhi's view on nonviolence. When Johnson returned from India, he lectured at Fellowship

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[215] J. Deotis Roberts, "Christian Liberation Ethics: The Black Experience," Religion and Life 48 (Summer 1979): 233.

[216] Lerone Bennett, "When the Man and the Hour are Met," Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), 27.

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House in Philadelphia on the Gandhian ethic of love and nonviolence.[217]

King was in the congregation on this occasion and reported later, "His message was so profound and electrifying." Having heard and read of nonviolence in social action, King concluded, "I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform."[218] Thus, Thurman's ideas on nonviolence in the Black struggle in white America must have been very useful to King.

King's emphasis, therefore, on the respect of the human personality could have been derived not only from the tradition of an Edgar S. Brightman of Boston University but from a Black Howard Thurman. In his book, Jesus and the Disinherited, Thurman repeatedly advocated that the enemy neighbor should be treated with an attitude of respect for his personality. We should love the enemy neighbor as Jesus loved the enemy Romans. Thurman explained how Jesus loved the Roman, "To love the Roman meant first to lift him out of the general classification of enemy. The Roman had to emerge as a person."[219]

Thurman set the stage for King's stance on agape, love, toward the enemy when he taught, "To love them means

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[217] John H. Cartwright, "The Religious Ethics of Howard Thurman," Journal of the International Theological Center 12 (Fall 1984-Spring 1985): 29-30.

[218] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 96.

[219] Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (New York: Abingdon, 1949), 95.

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to recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons."[220]

In the spirit of Jesus' love-ethic, Thurman posited that "no evil deed represents the full intent of the doer." Continuing in the same vein of thought, Thurman said of Jesus' teaching, "No evil deed was named by him as an expression of the total mind of the doer."[221]

In King's exposition on agape, love, King reflected Howard Thurman's thoughts when he stated, "We must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite express all that he is."[222]

Luther E. Smith, Jr., in his book, Howard Thurman, The Mystic at Prophet, suggests that Thurman's greatest legacy may be his vision of the inclusive community.[223] For Thurman saw community as the single most important search of his life, a quest which occupied his life and activities from childhood.[224] But John Cartwright reminds us that the quest was occasioned by the fact that Howard Thurman, a Black man, lived in American society.[225] Cartwright firmly believes that it is on the concept of community that

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[220] Ibid., 94.

[221] Ibid., 107.

[222] King, Strength to Love, 36.

[223] Luther E. Smith, Jr., Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet (New York: University Press of America, 1981), 176.

[224] Ibid., 45.

[225] Cartwright, "Ethics of Howard Thurman," 26.

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Thurman most impacted Martin Luther King, Jr.

However, Thurman arrived at community from a different angle. He called for a unity of nature and the rest of God's creation in community. Thurman points to the causes of some mental illness in the American society as an encroachment on the unity of nature and, consequently, the disrupting of community. Here are his words:

> Our atmosphere is polluted, our streams are poisoned, our hills are denuded, wild life is increasingly interminated, while more and more man becomes an alien on the earth and a fowler of his own nest. The price that is being exacted for this, is a deep sense of isolation, of being rootless and vagabond. Often I have surmised that this condition is more responsible for what seems to be the phenomenal increase in the mental and emotional disturbances in modern life than the pressures--economic, social and political--that abound on every hand. The collective psyche shrieks with agony that it feels as a part of the death cry of a pillaged nature.[226]

Like Martin Luther King, Thurman thinks love is essential to community. He defines love as "the intelligent, kindly but stern expression of kinship of one individual for another having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of life at its highest level."[227] This love speaks to the Black American situation because it actualizes ones potential and completes "fragmented and unfulfilled personality" and "brings together separated

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[226] Howard Thurman, The Search for Common Ground (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 83-84.

[227] Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), 109.

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lives." It makes for community.[228]

Thurman sees human freedom as an essential tool in life's arsenal in community-making. Oppressed people have the freedom to choose either to give assent to their circumstances or they can withhold it.[229]

However, for Thurman social change for the realization of the "inclusive" community must be motivated by the "inner life of individuals." Thus, he recommends:

> It is for this reason that a religious faith about the life and its meaning becomes a necessity for all who would work for a new heaven and a new earth. . . .[230]

The phrase "new heaven and new earth" expresses a here and now and not a utopian world outside of history.

The matter of religious faith brings to the fore Thurman's understanding of the historical Jesus. Jesus was a Jew. Being Jewish, Jesus understood what it meant to be an oppressed minority.[231]

Howard Thurman concluded insightfully, "Christianity as it was born in the mind of the Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed."[232]

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[228] Smith, 46.

[229] Ibid., 52.

[230] Howard Thurman, The Inward Journey (New York: Harper & Bros., 1961), 24-35.

[231] Smith, 55.

[232] Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 29.

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For him, Jesus came as a part of the poor dispossessed and oppressed, and served as a resource for people whose dignity and integrity fell under severe assaults.[233]

Thurman then moved to this relevant analogy:

> The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus of Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts. We are dealing here with conditions that produce essentially the same psychology.[234]

By associating Blacks as Jesus' disinherited, Thurman destroyed American civil religion's posture which equates Christian religion, conservative or liberal, with the power structure of the American society. These Christ-with-culture religious expressions, Smith concludes, are "heresies to the essence of Christianity."[235]

Thurman lays down the test of all religions:

> . . . I am convinced that the test of any religion, as far as its impact upon mankind is concerned, turns on what word does it have to share about God with men who are the disinherited, the outsiders, the fringe dwellers removed from the citadels of power and control of the society.[236]

However, Thurman challenged the disinherited in the American society--Black Americans--to take the initiative

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[233] Ibid., 7.

[234] Ibid., 34.

[235] Smith, 101.

[236] Cited by Smith in Howard Thurman, "Introduction," Why I Believe There is a God: Sixteen Essays by Negro Clergymen (Chicago: Johnson Pub., 1965), 80.

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over their own lives to make community possible; and the method for achieving this community is nonviolence. Thurman recommends a nonviolence to "shock the oppressor" into a state of upheaval. For "men do not voluntarily relinquish their hold on power."[237] Hence, for Thurman, nonviolent protest should be in boycotts, noncooperation demonstrations and sit-ins.

Luther Smith suggests that Thurman's development of nonviolent protest for the Black struggle for social change is his foremost achievement in his social witness. In this connection, Smith says of Thurman:

> He has done more than any other person to articulate the ethical and spiritual necessity for Blacks' civil liberties struggle to be grounded in the principle of nonviolence.[238]

Thurman chose nonviolent protest because it does not defeat the oppressor physically and psychologically and, consequently, begins to create the climate for love and community.

But Thurman's nonviolent philosophy developed in Jesus and the Disinherited is rooted solidly on the love-ethic of Jesus.[239] For Thurman, the key to social change is the "inner life of individuals."[240]

Martin Luther King had similar ideas for effecting

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[237] Smith, 113.

[238] Ibid., 114.

[239] Ibid., 113-114.

[240] Cartwright, "Ethics of Howard Thurman," 28.

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lasting social change in America. In speaking mainly to the oppressed, King stated:

> The ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the willingness of men to obey the unenforceable. . . . Desegregation will break down legal barriers and bring men together physically but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right.[241]

It is widely believed that Thurman's introduction of nonviolent protest to fight racial discrimination has impacted not only a James Farmer of the Committee of Racial Equality (1942) but Martin Luther King, Jr. On this question, Luther Smith quoted Jesse Jackson, President of Operation P.U.S.H., in stating that Thurman's conviction of nonviolence "blew away the philosophical underpinnings of racism and segregation," and drew persons like Martin Luther King, Jr., who "sat at his feet."[242]

Yet, Howard Thurman was unlike King in that he never became a social activist. In analyzing Thurman's posture, James Cone opines:

> Unlike most black ministers concerned about racial justice, liberation, love, suffering and hope, Thurman did not become a political activist; he took the "inward journey" focusing on a "spiritual quest" for liberation beyond race and ethnic origin. He was able to develop this universalist perspective without ignoring the urgency of political issues involved in the black struggle for justice.[243]

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[241] King, Where Do We Go, 100-101.

[242] Smith, 169.

[243] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 10.

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Undoubtedly, King came under the influence of Howard Thurman. They both believed in nonviolent protest as an instrument to fight segregation; and both practiced the love-ethic of Jesus in their respective ministries to realize the same end--the beloved community.

Summary

When Martin Luther King, Jr. is viewed from his philosophical and theological postures, we conclude all too soon that he is mainly a product of academia. But careful analysis of King and his work shows that King had many influences impinging upon his thought and action. Perhaps the most significant of these is his ministerial and religious tradition which directed him in his gathering up of all this varied knowledge and insights under the umbrella of a Black, many-faceted ministry and made them servants of his consuming passion--ridding American society of racism and economic injustice.

King saw the civil rights movement as another illustration of God working in history to right the wrongs in American society. He sees "a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole."[244]

For King, the civil rights movement meant leading disinherited Black people through nonviolence and faith in a personal God to victory. That was the reason, amidst

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[244] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 107.

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suffering, they could sing "We Shall Overcome" because the nonviolent resisters were convinced that although "the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice."[245]

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[245] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 10.

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CHAPTER 3

King's Use of the Bible: An Understanding of the Old and New Testament in the Spirit of Jesus

King's Hermeneutical Approach to the Bible

When one examines Martin Luther King's use of the Bible, it can be plainly seen that the critical methods he learned in white academia were never brought to bear on his sermons and Biblical instructions. For example, among King's Boston University papers is one of his research papers, "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction." In this paper, King recommended the historical critical method as that which produces "amazing results." He pointed out one of the benefits of "higher criticism" as being able to "trace the great ideas of Scripture from their elementary to their point of maturity. This advance has revealed to us that God reveals himself to us progressively through human history."[1]

As an example of what King called "progressive revelation," the new approach to the Bible, he cited the Old Testament anthropomorphic interpretation of God walking in the Garden of Eden. Later, God is presented as if "he was

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction," Essay, n.d., King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 2-3. [Written at Crozer Seminary while a student.]

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a god of war, battling for the triumph and victory of his people."[2] For King, the New Testament presents a different picture of God.

While there is some virtue in this interpretation, King never carried over this academic theological construction in his sermons as he addressed Black people all over America.

Thomas Hoyt, Jr. perceptively observed that King never used conventional exegesis:

> He tried to employ a kind of sociopolitical exegesis whereby he was addressed by the text and thereby addressed the text to the oppressed and oppressive communities.[3]

King was primarily concerned with allowing Scripture to speak eloquently to his suffering people seeking liberation from racial oppression. To make the Scriptures speak to a new generation, "King cut across technicalities and picked up a unifying theme: God's concern for a poor oppressed people."[4]

Hoyt suggests that King's method of explicating Scripture was to retell the story of God's deliverance of an oppressed people and promise of His continued interest in delivering the disinherited people of the American society.

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[2] Ibid., 4.

[3] Thomas Hoyt, Jr., "The Biblical Tradition of the Poor and Martin Luther King, Jr.," Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center 8 (Fall 1980): 31.

[4] Ibid.

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Thus, Hoyt insightfully observes why King employed this method:

> King came to Black people and brought a message of hope to the poor and oppressed in the language they knew so well. There was hardly a black man or woman who was not familiar with the language of the Biblical narrative and so when he drew on the story of Moses and the Exodus all black folk knew precisely what he was talking about. They were familiar with the account of how God delivered his people out of their bondage. Moreover, there was a close parallel of the living conditions of the two peoples, separated by such great distances in time. Both peoples were being held in bondage in a strange land; both people were accused by their master of being poor because of their laziness; both people felt a close affinity with Yahweh as their defender and protector. . . .[5]

Thus, King's method of using Scripture was predicated on the fact that the Bible has been a liberating instrument in the Black religious tradition. Hence, he employed a method which was readily understood by his black people. King then maximized the liberating elements of Bible in liberating his oppressed people from the chains of segregation and the bondage of economic exploitation.

Popular thought sees Martin Luther King as a civil rights leader who utilized political methods on behalf of Black Americans to integrate the American society. However, a close examination of King's works reveals that he was no mere civil rights leader with a cause--racial integration. His whole thinking was woven in Biblical concepts. Be it the advocation of boycotts and sit-ins or

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[5] Ibid., 32.

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demonstrations in Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma and Chicago, the ground of it all was God and Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ was the motivating factor for all his acts. Thus, Jesus was the key to King's understanding of the Bible. King moved from his New Testament understanding of Jesus to an understanding of the Old Testament themes. In this approach to the Bible, King was doing his interpretation within the milieu of the Black American community. In analyzing King's use of Scripture, this writer's chief interest is to discover how the Bible was brought to bear in the civil rights movement. King's book, Strength to Love, will be the chief reference for two reasons:

1. In reference to the economic and racial injustice of the civil rights era, King said, "The sermons in this volume have the present crisis as their background. They have been selected for this volume because they deal with the personal and collective problems that the crisis presents."

2. "All these sermons were preached during or after the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama."[6]

Figurative Interpretation

King's mind was suffused with the Bible. Not only his sermons but his speeches, interviews and articles were strewn with Bible texts and Biblical imageries. It must be said again that King did not make use of the tools of

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[6] King, Strength to Love, ix.

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Biblical exegesis in his interpretation of the Bible. James H. Smylie's observation on this subject is apt:

> He was not interested obviously in scholarly treatments of textual variants, in the form, place, expression, and scope of texts or, for that matter, in the differences between this world and the world view of the Hebrew peoples.[7]

Yet, King had many insightful approaches to the interpretation of the Bible. One of these is the figurative. A classic example of King's use of the figurative interpretation in unfolding the message of Scripture is his sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore." The sermon is based on Exodus 14:30: "And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore."

For King, in his sermon preached at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, "Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination. The Israelites symbolized goodness in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham. . . ."[8] In this schema, colonialism in Africa and Asia, and segregation in the United States, were the personification of Egypt. Consequently, the struggling people of color in these continents comprise Israel.[9]

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[7] Smylie: 81.

[8] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," Sermon, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, 17 May 1956, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 2.

[9] Ibid., 3.

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This sermon is amplified in King's book, Strength in Love. Here Egypt is narrowed to "the Pharaohs of the South" who resisted many a Moses and refused to let the Negro people go. But for King, evil could not ultimately succeed. For a "Red Sea passage in history ultimately brings the forces of goodness to victory and the closing of the same waters marks the doom and destruction of the forces of evil."[10]

King worked for racial integration in the United States and looked forward to the end of all wars--world peace. He always described the realization of these ideals in Biblical terms. Thus, when Black leaders could achieve desegregation in schools, church, industry and business in Atlanta, they would be building "a city which hath foundation whose builder and make is God."[11]

Again, in his Nobel Peace Prize Lecture of 1964, King looked forward to the time when the peoples of the world would "put an end to war and violence between nations" and "enter into a new world which is now possible, 'the city which hath foundation whose builder and maker is God.'"[12]

In picturesque language, King described equality and justice in the United States as a day when "we shall emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity

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[10] King, Strength to Love, 62, 63.

[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Democracy," Address, n.d., King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 8.

[12] Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Lecture, (Olso: Nobel Foundation, 1964), 17.

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to the bright and glittering day break of freedom and justice."[13]

But for King, the lover of Biblical imagery, such a desired state of affairs must have the "morning stars" singing together and the sons of God shouting for joy.[14] He had the "lion and the lamb" lying down, and "plowshares" beaten into "pruning hooks" to depict a time of peace, justice and community. King evidently saw this ideal state of things in the Biblical imagery of the New Jerusalem. But this New Jerusalem--Millennium as it were--for King, would be in America.

Homilectical Method

Another of King's treatment of the Bible is what can be called the homilectical approach. Here the preacher in King is unleashed. A text or a passage of Scripture is used as a point of departure for an idea or a theme to be developed and applied to his people's needs. Two sermons taken from the book, Strength to Love, will serve to show this hermeneutical method: "A Knock at Midnight," and "The Man Who was a Fool."

"A Knock at Midnight" is based upon the text, Luke 11:5-6 (RSV). "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three

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[13] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A View of the Dawn," Interracial Review, May 1957: 85.

[14] Ibid., 85.

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loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'?" Here King makes this knock on the door by the night visitor of the text represent the millions of people who come in crisis midnights to knock at the door of the church. Hence he said, "In our world today, the deep darkness of midnight is interrupted by the sound of a knock. On the door of the church millions of people knock."[15] For him the three loaves of bread of the Bible passage is what the modern traveler needs, namely, the bread of "lost faith in God," "agonizing . . . cry for the bread of hope" and the "deep longing for the bread of love."[16]

King then indicts the Christian Church on the international and national scenes for its indifference to the plea of Black Africans and Black Americans who seek social justice:

> Millions of Africans, patiently knocking at the door of the Christian Church where they seek the bread of social justice have either been altogether ignored or told to wait until later, which almost always means never. Millions of American Negroes, starving for the want of the bread of freedom, have knocked again and again on so-called white churches, but they have usually been greeted by a cold indifference or a blatant hypocrisy. Even the white religious leaders who have a heart-felt desire to open the door and provide the bread are often more cautious than courageous and more prone to follow the expedient than the ethical path. One of the "shameful tragedies of history is that the very

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[15] King, Strength to Love, 44.

[16] Ibid., 45.

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> institution which should remove man from the midnight of racial segregation participates in creating and perpetuating the midnight.[17]

Despite his indictment of the church, King's confidence in the church is demonstrated in this observation:

> Many men continue to knock on the door of the church at midnight, even after the church has so bitterly disappointed them because they know the bread of life is there.[18]

The Biblical preacher-activist closed the sermon with a very insightful note that "the weary traveler at midnight who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn." King then affirms, "Dawn will come disappointment sorrow and despair are born at midnight, but morning follows. . . . Weeping may endure for a night . . . but joy cometh in the morning."[19]

In the sermon entitled, "The Man Who was a Fool," based on Luke 12:20, King is just as homilectically sharp. For King, the rich man of the text is not a fool merely because he possesses wealth. He states that Jesus never makes a sweeping statement against wealth. Rather, Jesus condemns the misuse of it. For King, "the rich man was a fool because he permitted the ends for which he lived to become confused with the means by which he lived. The economic structure of his life absorbed his destiny."[20]

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[17] Ibid., 46.

[18] Ibid., 48.

[19] Ibid., 49-50.

[20] King, Strength to Love, 52.

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Martin Luther King saw that text as telling modern man:

> . . . Something basic about interdependence of men and nations. . . . In a real sense all of life is related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. . . . The rich man failed to realize this. He thought that he could live and grow in his little self-centered world. He was an individualist gone wild. Indeed he was an eternal fool![21]

In King's reflection on the death of the rich fool of Luke's gospel, he makes the incisive observation that, before the rich man dies physically:

> He was already dead spiritually. . . . The cessation of breathing was a belated announcement of an earlier death. He died when he failed to keep a line of distinction between the means by which he lived and the ends for which he lived and when he failed to recognize his dependence on others and on God.[22]

As King's Biblical hermeneutical use of imagery was not confined to individual's relationships but also to societies and nations, so was his homilectical insight. He saw the "certain rich man as western civilization, rich in goods and resources with its standards of success inextricably bound to the lust for acquisition." In this connection, King declared:

> We will not find peace in our generation until we learn a new that "a man's life consisted not in the abundance of things which he possesseth,"

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[21] Ibid., 54.

[22] Ibid., 56.

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> but in those inner treasuries of the spirit which no thief approacheth neither moth corrupted.[23]

In sum, for King, Scripture here attacks the corrosion around the hearts of the materialists which threaten to destroy their lives. Altruism is the element that can remove this corrosive agent and makes for the health of man's heart.

Experiencial Commitment

Besides his figurative and homilectical insight, King utilized Scriptures Biblical expressions as a vehicle of commitment to Christ. King not only saw the Cross as a symbol of victory for civil rights, but "it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation." As a consequence, King said he was willing, with Paul and other committed Christians, to bear the marks of the Cross of the Lord Jesus in his own body.[24]

Using the text, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear," King recalled his experience in Montgomery when the fingers of fear were clutching at his neck. He stated that it was only the sustaining word of Jesus, "And fear them not which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul, but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell," that kept him going. Baring his soul, King said, "I have been tortured without

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[23] Ibid., 57.

[24] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Suffering and Faith," Christian Century 77 (27 April 1960): 510.

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and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation," but based on faith in God, he had confidence in God who put words in the mouth of the old woman in the Montgomery struggle, "God's gonna take care of you."[25]

In words reminiscent of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, King recounted his traumatic experience in the South:

> I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia twelve times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of near fatal stabbing. So in a real sense, I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination.[26]

Then King spoke of the strength he found in the words of Christ, and his consequent commitment to Christ:

> In the midst of outer dangers, I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, Lo I will be with you. When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.[27]

His faith was so anchored in the Christ and Scripture that in his sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," King, a modern Paul, in triumphant commitment pledged:

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[25] King, Strength to Love, 117.

[26] Ibid., 140.

[27] Ibid., 141.

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"Neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Because of evil's vise-grip on man, King saw a great need for persons to commit themselves to Christ who alone can break this chain. Hence, through his use of Scripture, he made a strong plea for persons to commit themselves to God. King recognized that when commitment to God is translated into commitment for a worthy movement, human laws and dictates cannot be barriers to the movement's success. Hence, he challenged the staff at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference to emulate the faith of the Three Hebrew Young Men who refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar's call to bow to the golden image of wrong. In reference to this God-directed violation of this kingly law, King said their faith was not an "if faith" but a "tough faith." For King, the three Hebrews were listening to a voice "deep within them. . . . Thus they had come to say that they were going to do what conscience told them was right." Faith in God is not a bargaining faith. In King's own words, "It is never an 'if faith' but it is a "tough faith' . . . 'though he slay me, yet I will trust him.' And the great experience of life is 'tough experience.'"[28]

The forgoing treatment of this Biblical story shows

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[28] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A New Sense of Direction," Worldview 15 (April 1972): 12.

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how King was effective in using Scriptures as biography to bring strength and hope to an oppressed people.

In his use of Scripture, King was also evangelical in his appeal for inner-religion. In a sermon predicated on the text, "Why could we not case him out?" Matthew 17:19, King said the answer to this question is faith. King then appealed for a faith in Christ "to rescue us from the bondage of sin." He declared:

> Our humble and open hearted acceptance in faith. So by faith we are saved. Men filled with God and God operating through man bring unbelievable changes in our individual and social life.[29]

So in this scientific and technological age, an age devoid of the height of life, of Revelation, King urged his hearers "to give priority to the search for God." King then admonished:

> Allow his spirit to permeate your being. To meet the difficulties and challenges of life, you will need him. Before the ship of your life reaches its last harbor there will be long drawn out storms, howling and jostling winds and tempestuous seas that make the heart stand still. If you don't have a deep and patient faith in God, you will be powerless to face the delays, disappointments and vessitudes that inevitably come. Without God, all our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without him life is meaningless drama in which the decisive scenes are missing. But with him we are able to rise from tension-packed valleys to the sublime heights of inner peace and find radiant stars of hope against the nocturnal bosom of life's most depressing nights.[30]

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[29] King, Strength to Love, 124.

[30] Ibid., 75.

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Again, through the medium of the Bible, travelers at midnight seeking "three loaves," King asked the church not to turn away the young who knock at its door for the bread of salvation. He described the young modern travelers as, "Some who come tortured by the nagging guilt resulting from their wondering in the midnight of ethical relativism and their surrender to the doctrine of self-expression."

The duty of the church he said is to "lead them to Christ who will offer them the fresh bread of forgiveness."[31]

Martin Luther King could rise to his Black Baptist ministerial heritage and through the vehicle of Scripture communicate to men in crisis situations that God is able to see them through life's traumas. Thus, in a sermon on the text, "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling," moving with the power of the Word, King asked, as if he was "opening the doors of the church" in Black American church culture:

> Is someone here moving toward the twilight of life and fearful of that which we call death? Why be afraid? God is able. Is someone here on the brink of despair because of the death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, or the waywardness of a child, why despair? God is able to give you the power to endure that which cannot be changed. Is someone here anxious because of bad health? Come what may, God is able.[32]

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[31] Ibid., 48.

[32] Ibid., 106.

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King found a ready message in the Bible for varied situations. The words of Scripture were apt for preparations for demonstration against segregation, for the protest of the Vietnam war, and also to give spiritual resources to his lettered and unlettered hearers in Georgia and Alabama.

Love--The Cornerstone of the Bible's Teaching on Human Relations

Overview of Love

The understanding of King's conviction of experiential commitment to faith and Christ must be seen as a continuation of his concept of love derived from the Bible. As is mentioned earlier, the theme of love is the key to unlock Martin Luther King's understanding of the Bible. It is also only through the spectacles of love that we can see the meaning of King's life and work.

King proved that the meaning of ultimate reality--a belief shared by Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists, Christians and Jews--is love. For him, this "ultimate reality" is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of John:

> Let us love one another: for love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love. . . . If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us.[33]

King saw this love expressed in the Epistle of John as "the most durable power" in the world. To King, this

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[33] King, Nobel Lecture, 20.

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Biblical love is not only the ultimate reality of philosophers but the highest good of ethicists. What Epecurians and Stoics, Plato and Aristotle sought to discover--the summum bonum of life--he had discovered in the Bible as love. He expressed it this way:

> I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says "God is love." He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God. . . .[34]

King re-echoed the teaching of Jesus, "Love your enemies, Bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." He felt that this age sees this teaching of Jesus as impractical and maladjusted. But as a Christian, he was committed to this maladjustment--love. For King, maladjustment (love) "might well be the salvation of our civilization." This "love can transform oppressors into friends. It is this type of understanding and goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring miracles in the hearts of men."[35]

Love, the teaching of Jesus, holds the answer to the solution of men's problems for individuals, communities, nations and the world. With the eye of a Christian social prophet, King spoke of love, called maladjustment by the

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[34] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Most Durable Love," Christian Century 74 (June 1957): 709.

[35] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Phylon, April 1957: 30.

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short-sighted:

> I believe that it is through such maladjustment that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.[36]

Forgiving Quality of Love

King was not satisfied to speak of love in general terms. Hence, he called for a practical way to obey Jesus' command: "Love your enemies." To solve the human problem of loving the enemy, King employs another Bible principle, forgiveness.

King taught that we must first develop the capacity to forgive. This forgiving act must "be initiated by the person who has been wronged. . . . The absorber of some terrible act of oppression. Memory of the evil act has not been removed but 'the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to relationship.'" King showed that "forgiveness means reconciliation without which no man can love his enemies."

Echoing Howard Thurman, King said because human nature is torn between what he does and what he ought to do, the evil deed of the enemy neighbor never quite expresses all that he is.

The use of Greek language was pressed into service to explain, for King, the meaning of love as expressed in the

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[36] Martin Luther King, Jr., Commencement Address, Lincoln Univ., PA, 6 June 1961, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 15.

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New Testament. The following is King's explanation:

> In the New Testament there are three words for love. The word eros is a sort of aesthetic or romantic love. In platonic dialogues, eros is a yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. The second word is philia, a reciprocal and the intimate affection, and friendship between friends. We love those whom we like and we love because we are loved. The third word is agape, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. An overflowing love of God operating in the human heart. At this level, we love men not because we like them nor because their ways appeal to us nor even because they posses some type of divine spark. We love every man because God loves him.[37]

On whatever subject King spoke, he always had the race problem in America on the front page of his mind. This is evident in his sermon, "Love Your Enemies." King gave ample reasons why both individuals and groups should love the enemy. First, "returning hate for hate multiplies hate adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. . . . Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction." A second reason why love of the enemy is Christian was expressed as, "Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality."[38]

Taking a cue from Jesus' words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," King said we must love the enemy because he often acts out of blindness.

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[37] King, Strength to Love, 35-37.

[38] Ibid., 37.

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However, for King, the knowledge that the enemy has a unique relationship with God--the image of God--is the greatest reason why we should love the enemy. Consequently, King challenged Christians by saying, "We shall never be true sons of our heavenly Father until we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us."[39]

Having laid this background, King moved directly to the race question in America with the startling statement that, "While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist."[40]

King took this posture on love because it is Christian, but also because he saw love for the enemy as the only permanent solution to racism in the United States. His advice runs, "There will be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed people develop the capacity to love their enemies."[41]

Love, the Destroyer of Fear--Hate

Continuing on the theme of love as the only solution to man's problems, King accentuated love's fear--destroying power: "There is no fear in love; perfect love casteth out fear."

King said that hate is rooted in fear and fear is the

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[39] Ibid., 38.

[40] Ibid., 40.

[41] Ibid., 39.

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cause of war in the past. Fear is also responsible for the arms race between the super powers of the world. For King, all this is based upon a fear which produces hate. He saw the solution for this "not in arms, but love. Understanding and organized goodwill can cast out fear."

The perfect love--cast out--fear motif, a Scriptural use, King offered as a cure for racial segregation. King argued that racial segregation is based on irrational fears. These are chiefly pathological which give way to repression and aggressive violence on the part of white America. He offered what he thought was the remedy for white fear--hate."

> Only through our [Black American's] adherence to love and nonviolence will the fear in the white community be mitigated. . . . Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hate paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it.[42]

Teaching of Brotherhood and Justice: A Biblical Heritage

New Testament Teaching

Versus Racism

Brotherhood and justice are the logical consequence of love--the chief cornerstone of the kingdom of God. King then could not reconcile white Christian America and racial segregation. It was puzzling to King how the church, which gets its mandate from the Bible and Christ, could sanction

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[42] Ibid., 3-114.

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the denial of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of many by segregating the Negroes--sons and daughters of God.

Martin Luther King saw in the teaching of the New Testament a universal brotherhood. This brotherhood is expressed in these affirmations:

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.
> God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth . . . hath made of one blood, all nations for to dwell on all the face of the earth.

King said that these affirmations of the New Testament point to a note of universalism which is at the very heart of the Gospel. For King, "the Climax of this universalism is expressed in the fact that Christ died for all mankind."[43] Because of the central place universal brotherhood holds in the Gospel, the provincialism of segregation is incompatible with the Gospel. King logically concluded that the "theory and practice of segregation is morally unjustifiable" and out of context with Biblical thought.[44]

In King's thinking, segregation could not be viewed as a weakness of white America. But rather, it must be seen to have a philosophy diametrically opposed to Christianity and the Bible. Hence, it is a dangerous system. Drawing from the words of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber,

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[43] Martin Luther King, Jr., "For All - A Nonsegregated Society," Sermon, n.d., King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 1-2.

[44] Ibid., 2.

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King described segregation thus:

> It substitutes the "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship. The segregation relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevate him to the status of a person.[45]

Scripturally speaking, the Church (which is the body of Christ) was called upon by King to fight against segregation. King challenged the Church to purge its own body from racial discrimination and then in turn to cleanse American society at large.

Steeped in the prophetic tradition of his Black forebears, King saw the need for "genuine prophets" to arise from the American Church crying like an Amos of the eighth century B.C., "Let judgment roll down as waters and righteousness as a mightly stream."

King then challenged Christians to uphold the teachings of the New Testament on brotherhood:

> Christians must decide whether they will obey the eternal demands of the Almighty God or whether they will capitulate to the transitory demands of the defenders of the status quo.[46]

In the spirit of St. Paul, King argued that the demands of the Almighty will sometimes cause ministers and other obedient Christians to be seen as disturbers of the peace--that is the tranquility of the status quo. But King reasoned that "peace is not merely the absence of some

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 7.

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negative force, it is the presence of a positive force." The absence of the positive was the peace that was obtained in the South before the 50's. Consequently, King conceived of the civil right movement of bringing to the American society a true peace, not merely the absence of tension, but "the presence of justice and brotherhood."[47]

For King, this was what Jesus meant when he said, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword." Jesus did not mean that he came to start a physical war or he came not to bring positive peace. King interpreted the words of Jesus to mean:

> I came not to bring an old negative peace which makes for stagnant and deadening complacency, I came to bring something different and whenever I come a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, whenever I come a struggle takes place between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come not to bring negative peace but a positive peace which is brotherhood, which is justice, which is the kingdom of God.[48]

Of course, King's interpretation of Scripture here is fresh and apt. In his hands, the Scripture destroyed the old and static understanding of peace which encouraged the status quo. It is reminiscent of what Jesus did to the Old Testament--brought new and liberating meaning out of old and static concepts.

In King's thinking, those who struggle for brotherhood

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[47] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 9.

[48] Ibid.

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and justice get their mandate from agape--love. This love teaches that "all humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers." Therefore, to resist injustice is to meet the needs of our suffering brothers. When this is done nonviolently, the civil rights worker is assured of "cosmic companionship."[49] ". . . Which causes the "arc of the moral universe" to bend "toward justice."[50]

Neighborliness and Altruism:

A Scriptural Injunction

Throughout Martin Luther King's works, great importance is put on man's physical needs. Thus, King saw in the Bible a keen concern for the whole man. Hence, the words of Micah 6:8, "Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God," were often on Martin Luther King's lips to express concern for all suffering people. Thus, in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, he struck the same note of compassion, "No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for the 'least of these.'"[51]

However, nowhere in the works of Martin Luther King is the love ethic of Jesus issued in such practical concern for the neighbor as in his sermon, "On Being a good Neighbor." The good Samaritan risked without questioning his own safety for the salvation of others. For King, the

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[49] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 106.

[50] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 10.

[51] King, Nobel Lecture, 14.

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altruism that Jesus advocated must not be confused with pity. He explained that "pity may arise from an abstraction called humanity, but sympathy grows out of a concern for a particular human who lies at life's roadside." Illustrating this point, King said the American missionary mentality of pity sent millions of dollars to Africa "from the hands of church people who would die a million deaths before they permit a single African the privilege of worshipping in their congregation."[52] Decisively, but as Jesus would in his use of the Old Testament, King commented on this missionary pity:

> Money devoid of love is like salt devoid of savor good for nothing except to be trodden under the foot of men. True neighborliness requires personal concern.[53]

Although King called for the enactment of laws for desegregation, he always appealed to inner spiritual motive among Americans that would go deeper than desegregation. King believed this element in both Blacks and whites would make for community. In this connection, the good Samaritan was commended for going beyond the call of duty--tending the wounded, conveyed him to an inn, left money for his care and promised to pay any excess expenses. King called this "excessive altruism" obedience to the law of the unenforceable. King appealed to Black Americans to apply

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[52] King, Strength to Love, 21.

[53] Ibid., 21.

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this principle to the race situation in the nation and from desegregation to integration. In reference to white racists' fears and prejudices, King challenged white Americans:

> These dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invincible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.[54]

King believed that Jesus' love ethic makes each Christian involved in the suffering of the wounded of life's Jericho roads. Consequently, King stated his decision "not to ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me and his salvation enlarges me."[55] Certainly, this is a broad understanding of neighborliness which transcends the narrow confines of race. This points to a meaningful universalism in King's use of Scripture.

It was this New Testament teaching of love that was the motivating factor in King's life and work. Certainly, as a product of academia, King drew insights from literature, philosophy and psychology, but his real motivation came from the Bible. Jesus' love ethic was his guiding star. What King spoke of as the guiding force behind the Montgomery bus boycott is true of the whole civil rights

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[54] Ibid., 23.

[55] Ibid.

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movement under his leadership, "It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."[56]

It is well-known that great emphasis has been placed on loving the enemy in the Black American community as a means of solving race problems. Love has been the theme of great Black American preachers such as Richard Allen, founder of the AME Church.[57] It was also tenant of Howard Thurman, founder and pastor of a San Francisco-based church whose theme is love--the Church for the Fellowship of All People.[58] Consistent with his Black tradition, King utilized the love ethic of the New Testament to understand the Old Testament and, particularly, those passages which have to do "with oppression and the Pharaohs, the promised land, and God's chosen people." Speaking of King's method of interpretation of the Bible, James H. Smylie insightfully observes:

> In this love, King laid hold of one of the most important traditions of Black American, turned it into an instrument of social change through nonviolent resistance and confounded American Pharaohs--dependent to a large extent upon the same biblical tradition for self-identity.[59]

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[56] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Experiment in Love, Jubilee, Sept. 1958: 13.

[57] Allen, 80.

[58] Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 91-94.

[59] Smylie, 81.

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The Pharaohs--Egypt--Chosen People--Promised Land--Motif: A Theological Interpretation

Pharaohs and Oppressive Egypt

One of the chief themes of Martin Luther King was the interpretation of oppressive systems in the United States and elsewhere as the "Egypt" of Scripture and, consequently, the perpetrators of these systems of oppression as pharaohs. In this schema, King also saw a promised land for God's oppressed people. In this context, Gayraud S. Wilmore is right when he suggested that King's interpretation of Scripture was in the tradition of his black forebears who understood the Old Testament prophets of justice in the spirit of Jesus.[60] Two of these Black American forebears are David Walker of Boston and Richard Allen of Philadelphia.

In David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, Walker compared the slavery of Blacks in America to the slavery of the Israelites under the Pharaohs of Egypt. Walker felt that American Pharaohs' cruelty to Blacks was unmatched in the annals of history. Walker addressed white Americans thus:

> Americans: notwithstanding you have and do continue to treat us more cruel than any heathen nation ever did a people it had subjected to the same condition that you have us.[61]

Richard Allen, though in a milder tone, said that the

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[60] Wilmore, 92.

[61] Aptheker, One Continual Cry, 136.

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American slaveowners were doing just "as Pharaoh did." Allen admonished the American Pharaohs "to consider that God was the first pleader of the cause of the slaves."[62]

It is not known whether King read the writings of Walker and, particularly, Richard Allen. But whether or not he did, King knew well that the Exodus theme analogy of the Black American situation was an integral part of his Black religious culture. King conceived the Black American struggle as a continuity of Ancient Israel's fight to free itself from the Pharaohs of Egypt. He described Moses as standing in Pharaoh's court centuries ago and crying, "Let my people go." King saw this event as "an opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle in the United States is a later chapter in the same story."[63]

In his sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," based on the Exodus story, King rose to the full stature of his Black American preacher forebears in dealing with this theme. Here King interpreted the story. For him, "Egypt symbolized evil in the form of humiliating oppression and ungodly exploitation . . . and the Israelites symbolized goodness in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." In this combat, he saw Israel struggling to gain her freedom.[64]

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[62] Allen, 70.

[63] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 170.

[64] King, Strength to Love, 59.

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King then moved the ancient story to our modern world. "The truth of the text," King said, "is revealed in the contemporary struggle between good in the form of freedom and justice, and evil in the form of oppression, and colonialism." He referred to the peoples of Asia and Africa--colonial subjects--as once "dominated politically, exploited economically and segregated, and humiliated by foreign powers."[65]

A Red Sea of deliverance was opened for the colonials. Consequently, for King, "The oppressed masses in Asia and Africa have won their freedom from the Egypt of colonialism. . . . The peoples see the evils of colonialism and imperialism dead upon the seashore."[66]

In King's view, nowhere in the world has evil raised its ugly head as in racial segregation in the United States. The forces of evil fought long and hard with the forces of good before the forces of good won in the decrees of the United States Supreme Court. Thus, for King, the forces of justice have left Egypt determined to reach the Promised Land. Despite the delaying tactics of the Pharaohs of the South with their "legal maneuvers, economic reprisals" and even physical violence, "a red sea passage in history ultimately brings the forces of goodness to victory. . . ."[67]

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[65] Ibid., 61.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 63.

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In reference to the drowning of the Egyptians, King said, "We see the forces of segregation gradually dying on the seashore. . . . All this reminds us that evil carries the seed of its own destruction."[68]

It is noteworthy that King's interpretation of the Egyptians' death on the seashore is reminiscent of Jesus' love ethic and King's viewing the Old Testament in the spirit of Jesus. King explained, "The meaning of this story is not to be found in the drowning of Egyptian soldiers, for one should not rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being." Rather, "this story symbolizes the death of evil and of inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation."[69] James Smylie is right when he says that King's interpretation of this particular incident in the Exodus story was informed by "agape 'and Jesus' teaching that excluded vindictiveness and vengeance."[70] It must be pointed out also that King's posture of non-vindictive love was a part of his Black American Church tradition. We can recall that Richard Allen, after telling his people that it was naturally tempting to hate the American Egyptian, admonished them to follow the "meek and humble Jesus . . . who hath commanded to love our enemies."[71]

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., 60.

[70] Smylie, 84.

[71] Allen, 70.

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King, although he loved the Pharaohs of America, challenged his people to beware of the tactics of the Pharaohs of America, the Pharaohs of the South, who, when challenged by the forces of goodness to end segregation, held power with fanatical resistance. At the heightening of pressure for Blacks' deliverance, they will say "wait." Then, as if they own the Negro, they ask, "What more does the Negro want?" According to King, "wait," or "go slower" for the Pharaohs means "never." For King, the Negro will not accept a liberty "divided into installments, doled out on a differed payment." King's answer to that question of the Pharaohs of America, "What more?" was: The "Negro wants absolute and immediate freedom and equality, not in Africa or in some imaginary state but right here in this land today."[72]

Another tactic of what King called modern Pharaohs is tokenism. In King's thinking, tokenism meant that the Negroes could be handed the glitter of metal "symbolizing the true coin, and authorizing a short trip to democracy . . . Tokenism is a promise to pay. Democracy, in its finest sense, is payment. . . ."[73] King abhorred tokenism because it benefited only the elite few. When the "Talented Tenth" of the Black race rises, the untalented 90 percent is left to suffer the indignities of racism. Hence there is no

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[72] King, Why We Can't Wait, 128-131.

[73] Ibid., 31.

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role for most Black people in tokenism. For King, tokenism was also dangerous because the token positions given to the few elite Black Americans serve "to obscure the present reality of segregation and discrimination."[74]

When Black Power groups sought to undercut King's influence, he declared, "Two many Negro organizations are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth." King then drew on the metaphoric language of the Exodus theme to analyze the divisive effect of the "Black Power" stance:

> The Pharaohs had a favorite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: Keep them fighting among themselves. The divide-and-conquer technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression. But when slaves unite the Red Seas of history open and the Egypt of slavery crumble.[75]

Like David Walker and Richard Allen of yesteryear, King thought it very unfair that so much should be expected of the deprived Negro when he was given far less chances than even the immigrant in this society. That the Negro should pull himself up by his bootstrap like immigrants in the American society is like the Pharaoh of old asking the Israelites to make "bricks without straw." He reminded America that barefooted Blacks had no shoes to pull up bootstraps. Hence, this tactic of the Pharaohs is sending

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[74] Ibid., 31, 33.

[75] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 124.

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the Negro in the wilderness without any form of assistance.[76]

King took strength from the success of many a Moses in the third world. Thus, he spoke of Asian and African leaders' pleas for independence in exodus-story symbolism, reminding that many "a courageous Moses pleaded passionately for the freedom of his people."[77] The courage of some "Moses" from the third world inspired King and other Black Americans not to wait on the Pharaohs for their freedom but rather to do something themselves about their deliverance.[78]

In this context, King said:

> Something within has reminded the Negro of his birthright of freedom and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his Black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers in Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice."[79]

According to King, he experienced what Moses encountered as he led Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Part of this was confusion and misunderstanding on how God works. This led to apathy and false trust. Many of King's people from the Black-oriented churches felt that racial

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[76] King, Why We Can't Wait, 23.

[77] King, Strength to Love, 61.

[78] King, Why We Can't Wait, 21-22.

[79] Ibid., 87.

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segregation could be solved by prayer alone. King attributed this type of mentality to a lopsided magisterial reformation which over-emphasized the transcendence of God at the expense of the imminence of God's nature. King countered this view when he declared:

> God who gave us minds for thinking and bodies for working, would defeat his own purpose if he permitted us to obtain through prayer what may come through work and intelligence.[80]

"Prayer is a dangerous substitute," for work, King argued. To solve a modern-day Moses problem, King drew upon the exodus analogy:

> When Moses strove to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, God made it clear that he would not do for them what they could do for themselves. And the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward.[81]

Yet, King confessed that all was of God. James Smylie reminded us that King saw the God of the universe struggling for and with the oppressed. Thus, he echoed King's thoughts that, "God remembers his people in Egypt. He gives the inner resource to the oppressed to bear Egypts, to break their lords and to undertake the journey through the wilderness. He is the one who ensures the victory over evil." God is the only one who gives the Promised Land.[82]

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[80] King, Strength to Love, 122.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Smylie, 85.

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The Promised Land and Chosen People

From the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott to King's last speech at Memphis, King frequently made use of the Biblical term, Promised Land. What did his people hear in that term? Of course, some of his people who were schooled in end-time reward of the heavenly Caanan may have understood him to mean promised land beyond this earth or this life. But King did not look to any other-worldly promised land. King was in the main this-worldly. Thus, in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King spoke of the promised land in this-world terms saying, "The United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of justice."[83]

In the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott, King spoke to the Montgomery Improvement Association members about how they must make sacrifices to achieve justice and equality in Montgomery. He challenged them:

> Freedom doesn't come on a silver platter. Whenever there is any great movement toward freedom, there will inevitably be some tension. Somebody will have to have the courage to sacrifice. You don't get to the promised land without going through the wilderness. Though we may not get to the promised land, we know it is coming for God is for it.[84]

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[83] King, Why We Can't Wait, 87-88.

[84] King, "An Address to Montgomery Improvement Association," 22 March 1956, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 1.

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The latter part of this address points out what is the promised land.

"We don't worry about some of the things we have to go through. They are just a necessary part of the great movement that we are making toward freedom."[85] It is evident that what King meant here by promised land is freedom and justice for Blacks in Montgomery, Alabama.

Again in his Nobel lecture in Oslo, when describing the struggle of Black Americans for freedom and justice, King drew on the Egypt-Promised Land motif. King informed his audience:

> We still have a long, long way to go before the dream of freedom is a reality for the Negro in the United States. To put it figuratively in Biblical language, we have left the dusty soils of Egypt and crossed a Red Sea whose waters had for years been hardened by a long and piercing winter of massive resistance. But before we reach the majestic shore of the Promised Land, there is a frustrating and bewildering wilderness ahead.[86]

On the last night of King's life in Memphis, King encouraged his people by speaking of the coming to the promised land. "I may not get there with you," King said, "but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."[87]

From these examples of King's use of this oft-quoted

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[85] Ibid.

[86] King, Nobel Lecture, 7.

[87] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A View from the Mountaintop," Renewal, April 1969: 5.

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Biblical phrase, "the Promised Land," it can clearly be demonstrated that King meant freedom and justice for Black Americans in these United States.

But the universalist King had a place in this promised land for people of other races and cultures. As he included the colonial peoples of the world as a part of those under the heels of Egyptian oppression, so King included the colonials of Asia, Africa, South America and the Caribbean as being released from the Pharaohs of the world and moving toward the promised land of freedom and justice. Describing the mood of the American Negro, King said, "He feels a deepening sense of identification with his Black African brothers and with his brown and yellow brothers of Asia and the Caribbean. With them he is moving with a sense of increasing urgency toward the promised land of racial justice."[88]

Even in a clearer and more graphic manner, King depicted the victory of ex-colonial people moving in the promised land of freedom and justice:

> They have broken loose from the Egypt of colonialism and imperialism, and they are now moving through the wilderness of adjustment toward the promised land of cultural integration. As they look back they see the old order of colonialism and imperialism passing away, and the new order of freedom and justice coming into being.[89]

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[88] King, "Playboy Interview," 124-125.

[89] King, "Facing the Challenge," 26.

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We would conclude that King's use of "promised land" particularly meant freedom and justice for oppressed Black Americans but, in a secondary and general manner, it meant freedom and justice for all the oppressed peoples of the world.

"Chosen people" is part of the exodus imagery utilized in King's application of the exodus to the American scene. In the Christian tradition which King inherited and in which he was educated, the term "chosen people" refers to the people of the church. But King had serious indictment for the church to see it as "chosen people." In his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which was addressed to white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South who criticized his civil rights demonstration in Birmingham as inappropriate, King thundered, "The judgment of God is upon the church as never before." According to King, in the midst of blatant injustice to the Negro, "white church men stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities." In the midst of the Negro's struggle for economic justice, the white church showed unchristian, unconcern with the words, "Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern."[90]

Saddened by a church that he loved, King was prone to turn to the "inner spiritual church, the church within a

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[90] King, Why We Can't Wait, 90.

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church, as the true ekklesia. . . ."[91]

For King, American Blacks, though not all chosen people, have a special mission to accomplish. This is, the conversion of white America through the love of Jesus of Nazareth. This sense of mission of Black Americans towards white Americans has been long advocated in the Black community. Richard Allen was one of these champions of the Negro's mission to white America. Allen advised the slaves to have "an affectionate regard toward your masters and mistresses. . . ." Allen argued that this attitude would "tend to promote your liberty."[92] King, believing in this ancient philosophy of a Black mission to white America, challenged Black Power advocates and other American Blacks by saying, "Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness." King felt that the suffering through which Black Americans passed equipped them to help lift white America to a higher and nobler order. So, King declared:

> This is the challenge. If we will dare to meet it honestly, historians in the future years will have to say there lived a people--a Black people--who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many days, and who through tenacity and creative commitment, injected new meaning in the veins of American life.[93]

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[91] Ibid., 92.

[92] Allen, 72.

[93] King, Where Do We Go, 133-134.

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Although Black Americans have a particular mission, some of them were not among the chosen people because "they prefer the fleshpots of Egypt to the ordeals of emancipation." King said that these have become "accustomed to being slaves." Hence, they are not interested in deliverance or deliverers.[94]

King described another group of Black Americans who ignored the chosen people going to the promised land. These are aptly named "Black Bourgeoisie" who are occupied in middle class struggle for status and prestige. They are more concerned about "conscious consumption" than about the cause of justice.[95]

For King, the chosen people are drawn from all races who possess faith and active love in Jesus Christ and who work for the liberation of oppressed people in the world. According to King, they are members of the "oppressor race" who "see that injustice must be rooted out by strong persistent and determined action."[96] These too marched against injustice. They were locked up in the filthy jails. They are white and black, yellow and brown, Catholic and Protestant. It was King's conviction that those of all ages comprised "the colony of heaven."[97]

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[94] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 211-212.

[95] Ibid., 218.

[96] King, Why We Can't Wait, 89.

[97] Ibid., 91.

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King's masterful use of the exodus imagery to describe the struggle of Black Americans was always guided by the love ethic taught by Jesus. John Elder, in an article in the Harvard Divinity School Bulletin, said that King's "exodus, wilderness and promised land" themes rescued an inheritance of religious terminologies of white Americans," as well as Blacks. Elder continued, "In a day when the usefulness of 'God-talk' is widely questioned, King used the Biblical symbols that are at the heart of American civil religion and gave them fresh meaning."[98]

James Smylie concurred with Elder when he pointed out that King's approach to the solution of America's problem drew to himself Americans, whites and blacks, Christians and Jews. But Smylie argued that the hostility King encountered from the majority of whites was:

> Motivated in part because he employed in his rationalization Biblical themes and metaphors so important to white America. This was all the more aggravating because he interpreted the Old Testament metaphors concerning oppression, Pharaohs and the Promised Land through his understanding of the imperative placed upon him by Jesus.[99]

Summary

In the hands of King, the power of Scripture was released to look God-ward and man-ward. King avoided the wooden literalistic tradition of the Black Baptist

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[98] John D. Elder, "Martin Luther King and American Civil Religion," Harvard Divinity School Bulletin 1, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 17.

[99] Smylie, 89.

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tradition. But he also rose above liberal traditional interpretations which beam for the head. King's interpretation of the Bible appealed not only to the intellect but to the inner resources of man.

Coming from a suffering Black American people, King saw not only an otherworldly transcendent God of Scripture but a this-worldly immanent God. King's interpretation of Scripture revealed a God of history whose "intentions were for men to be free living in a just society."[100] Hence, King's understanding of Scripture spoke penetratively to the injustices meted out to Black Americans and other oppressed people of the world. He called for a religion that is concerned not only about the souls of men but also about their bodies which suffer in the ghettos and slums of America.

King's interpretation of the Bible was always informed by agape love taught by Jesus. Because Americans have a Judeo-Christian orientation, King challenged white Americans to love Black Americans because "they are your brothers." Blacks too have the "image of God." They are from the hand of the Creator. In a similar manner, King's understanding of Scripture summoned Blacks to love the oppressor race, the enemy race, not because they have been good but because they still have within them the "image of

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[100] Robert A. Bennett, "Black Experience and the Bible," Theology Today 27 (Jan. 1971): 428.

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God." Love, he commanded, because Jesus said, "Love your enemies."

King's hermeneutical principle tapped the resources of Scripture for faith and revealed a "God who is able to give us the inner resources to face the storms and problems of life . . . and transform the dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows."[101]

In the hands of King, the Bible was not frozen and static; it was dynamic. It was not literal; it could be figurative, King's interpretation took the ancient exodus motifs, clothed them in modern garments, and pressed them into the civil rights service to secure justice and freedom for Black Americans--for all oppressed people of the world. Yet, his interpretation was always guided and informed by a love taught by Jesus of Nazareth.

However, King's preaching constitutes a distinct way of interpretation. The Black community, which king represented, believes that God is still acting in delivering his oppressed people from racial and economic injustice. Thus, the interpretation assumes an existential immediacy of the text in which the Word of God speaks to the person. This becomes a dialogue with the text.

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[101] King, Strength to Love, 107.

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CHAPTER 4

Ethical Elements in King's Thinking

Creator and Lord of History

The Creator is a Personal and Living Reality

Martin Luther King's ethical thinking was directed toward social ends. His formal study was systematic theology and philosophy. However, due to King's sensitivity toward the oppression of segregation in the South where he grew up, he came to be interested in social ethics. As King put it: "I have become more and more interested in social ethics."[1]

However, King was not engaged in a mere cerebral discussion of ethics. He was an ethicist in working clothes. The context for his ethics was black oppression and the search for a way to liberate his people. J. Deotis Roberts' advice to Blacks doing ethical thinking was applicable to Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Our context must be the African-Afro-American religious connection wedded to the biblical faith."[2]

Thus, from the milieu of his Black religious culture,

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Christian Century 77 (6 April 1960): 440.

[2] Roberts, "Christian Liberation Ethics: The Black Experience," 229.

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King thought out his ethical principals and actively demonstrated them in the interest of the oppressed. King then moved from an ethical thought grounded in God to a concept of man laden with social concerns. Amidst the clamor of materialism and science for a man-centered universe, King felt that there was ample evidence for a God-centered universe, e.g., "at night the stars bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity." King, speaking of the laws of relativity, affirmed that the magnificent orderliness of the universe cannot be the result of fortuitous interplay of atoms and electrons. This points to a Creator--God--who is still in the universe.

For King, humankind's technological and scientific developments cannot banish Him from the microcosmic compass of the atoms nor from "the vast unfathomable ranges of interstellar space." Rather, modern persons of faith using this scientific equipment see light from heavenly bodies which originated light years ago. We are reminded of the Psalmist exclamation:

> When I consider the heavens and the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that thou has visited him?[3]

In contradistinction to materialistic or atheistic philosophies such as Communism, Christianity affirms a theistic realism. Consequently, King declared: "At the

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[3] King, Strength to Love, 74-75.

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center of the Christian faith is the affirmation that there is a God in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality."[4] This God is not to be conceived in temporal terms, nor is there any reality that did not have its origin in Him or is unknown to Him. Ultimate allegiance is to be given to Him by man for He is that "eternal Being who is the source and ground of all reality."[5]

Thus, faith in this personal God and God himself sustained King in one of his severest tests to give up the struggle for desegregation in Montgomery. He told of a night when, physically exhausted, he was awakened with a phone call that taunted, mocked and threatened his life. He related the soul-shattering experience:

> In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. . . . I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers, I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone.
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> At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced Him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever."[6]

It is significant that, in King's hour of crisis, he did not call on a theology he learned in white academia--

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[4] Ibid., 94.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 107.

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Crozer Seminary and Boston University--but his Black Baptist faith. It was the Black religion of his slave forebears mediated through the Black Church that sustained King.

Therefore, Peter Paris, in Black Leaders in Conflict, comments on King's experience is apropos:

> No Tillich or Wieman ever wrote about the kind of personal experience of God King described . . . . Neither Tillich's God nor Wieman's God exemplify the personality characteristics that would motivate that kind of "personal communication."[7]

This writer agrees with Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s assessment of King's vision bearing not the mark of Gandhi or any of King's acknowledged white intellectual mentors, but rather of the "Negro Baptist Tradition."[8]

Black people, with their backs constantly against the wall, know what it is to take their problems to a caring God. When the courts of the land fail to redress wrongs done to them, Blacks know what it is to turn to a personal God who answers prayer.

King then did the normal thing that his faith in the Black Church instructed its people to do: "Lean on the mighty arms of Jesus."

Thus, King spoke meaningfully of this faith in a living personal God.

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[7] Peter J. Paris, Black Leaders in Conflict (New York: Pilgrim, 1978), 74.

[8] Lerone Bennett, "When the Man and the Hour are Met," 28.

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> The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I have found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, "Lo, I will be with you."[9]

King could go through the dangers that were entailed in his hazardous work without nagging fear because he had faith in what he called "cosmic sustenance." Hence, he assured Christians:

> We are not alone in this vast uncertain universe. Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God. . . . Above the manyness of time stands the one eternal God, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us and love to keep us. His boundless love supports and contains us as a mighty ocean contains and supports the tiny drops of every wave. . . . Any man who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life without fatigue of pessimism.[10]

King had an optimistic faith in the living God who was and is the hope of his race. For King, the sustaining God works also in secular history. Materialistic history and social and economic philosophies, including communism, cannot survive because they are in opposition to the

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[9] King, Strength in Love, 141.

[10] Ibid., 115.

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transcendent purpose of universal history. God is working through history to bring unity out of divisions--concord out of the discordant notes of secular events. As a Black Baptist preacher, King declared that God "works to pull down the mountain of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history, His wonders to perform."[11] But God is personal, acting in history "like an everloving Father," interested in "the salvation of his children."[12]

King taught that God was moving in the tensions of modern history to create out of a bleak old order, a radiant new one.[13] This divine force was moving with a sense of cosmic urgency. Thus, Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery bus, was being tracked down by the Zeitgeist. "She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny."[14] Similarly, the oppressed colonial peoples of Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean have "been caught up by the Zeitgeist" as they struggle to break the manacles of colonialism.[15]

Making use of the Exodus motif, a theme hallowed in the Black community from the time of slavery, King saw God

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[11] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 69-70.

[12] King, Strength in Love, 64.

[13] King, "Facing the Challenge," 25.

[14] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 44.

[15] King, Why We Can't Wait, 87.

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conquering the evils of history. King believed that God was at the helm guiding the ship of history to a safe harbor. Hence, the apparent victories of evil are illusory. In the perennial struggle of good and evil, Christianity affirms that although evil seems to be successful, good will ultimately triumph. God is with the forces of good working to overcome evil. Thus, in Biblical symbolism, King admonished: "The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a vivid reminder that something in the very nature of the universe assists goodness in the perennial struggle with evil."[16] For King, the present Black struggle against segregation and oppressive forces of the world is a sign of the continuation of the Exodus episode and, consequently, God's activity in history. Hence, King's assurance:

> As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it.[17]

King reflected the faith of the Black Church by rejecting reason as a means of ever finding God. He believed that this God who works through history and secular events--this God who is the ground of all reality, the clue to understanding the universe--could not be discovered by science and human reasoning. He believed a

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[16] King, Strength in Love, 60.

[17] Ibid., 64.

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knowledge of God can be found only in Jesus Christ. So, King asked:

> Where do we find this God? In a test tube? No. Where else except in Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives? By knowing him we know God. Christ is not only God-like but God is Christlike. Christ is the word made flesh. He is the language of eternity translated in the words of time. If we are to know what God is like and understand his purposes for mankind, we must turn to Christ. By committing ourselves absolutely to Christ and His way, we will participate in the marvelous act of faith that will bring us to the true knowledge of God.[18]

It is clear that this same understanding of God makes a bridge between Blacks' use of the Bible and their involvement in social action.

King's Doctrine of Man and Its Implication for Racial Justice

Image of God

King valued the doctrine of man in the interest of the oppressed Black people in America. Hence, he moved from his concept of a personal God operating in history for the well being of the forces of good to an ethical understanding of man as God's creation of the highest possible value. As a Black Baptist preacher, his sermons were suffused with verses from the King James version of the Bible. In answer to his sermon titled, "What is Man?", King quoted the words of the Psalmist: "Thou has made him little less than God and does crown him with gory and honor."

For King, the Psalmist spoke of God making man in his

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[18] Ibid., 76.

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own image. Thus, King explained:

> Man is a being of spirit. He moves "up the stairs of his concepts" into a wonderworld of thought. Conscience speaks to him and he is reminded of things divine. This is what the Psalmist meant when he says that man was crowned with gory and honor. This spiritual quality gives him the unique capacity to live on two levels, he is in space and time and yet above them. He can do creative things that lower animals can never do. He can think a poem and write it; he can think a symphony and compose it; he can think of a great civilization and produce it. . . . By his ability to reason, his power of memory, and his gift of imagination man transcends time and space. As marvelous as are the stars is the mind of man who studies them. This is what the Bible means when it affirms that man is made in the image of God.[19]

Most Black religionists do not write their theology systematically. Therefore, King frequently treated this understanding of man in sermons, speeches and periodicals, and from this sacred view of man, he called the American Christian society to give justice to the oppressed Blacks commensurate to their divine origin. Consequently, in an article entitled, "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," King argued:

> Our Judeo-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term the image of God, is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth, there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the creator.[20]

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[19] Ibid., 90.

[20] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," Address, n.d., King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 7.

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Again, speaking with American racism on the front page of his mind, King said:

> The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God.[21]

This view of man places high value on people of all races, cultures, nationalities. It sees Blacks and whites as equals because they are all children of God. It places equal value on the haves and the have-nots because they were all made in the image of God. So, when he received his Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to gain freedom for the poor and oppressed Blacks of Montgomery, King declared to the world:

> No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for "the least of these." Deeply etched in the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we feel this as a profound moral fact we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with starvation and ill-health when we have the means to help them.[22]

Martin Luther King was always concerned about the great damage segregation did to his oppressed people. Even when evil has scarred a person's nature so that it produces viciousness and evil act, for King, "God's image is ineffably etched in his being."[23]

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[21] Ibid., 1.

[22] King, Nobel Lecture, 14.

[23] King, Strength to Love, 36.

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Holistic Versus Secular--

Sacred

Traditionally, American Protestant evangelical churches have put a division between one's soul and body. Black people's bodies have suffered so much at white hands that the Black Church has never made that dichotomy between body and soul. Thus King, who was a product of the Black Church, emphasized the importance of seeing man as a unit--the image of God. Because God made man in his image, man is good. Everything in this creation is good, "for we read in the Book of Genesis that everything God made is good." The body also is good. King said there should be no confusion of the Bible-oriented Christian doctrine of man with the Greeks' concept of man. Plato and other Greek thinkers

> came to feel that the body is inherently evil and that the soul will never reach its full maturity until it is freed from the prison house of the body. Christianity, on the other hand, contends that the will, and not the body, is the principle of evil. The body is both sacred and significant in Christian thought. [24]

Consequently, Christians and the churches should give serious attention to man's physical and material well-being. Religion must be concerned not only about the life to come but the life now; so, the church must help oppressed man here and now. In this vein of thought, King challenged the churches:

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[24] Ibid., 89.

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> But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social condition. Religion deals not only with the hereafter but also with the here. Here--where the precious lives of men are still sadly disfigured by poverty and hatred. Here--where millions of God's children are being trampled over by their own feet of oppression. Here--where millions are consigned to degradation and injustice and where the habitation of men are filled with agony and anguish.[25]

The otherworldly Christians came in for harsh treatment by King when he rebuked:

> As Christians we must think not only about "mansions" in the sky, but also about the slums and ghettos that cripple the soul, not merely about the streets in heaven "flowing with milk and honey," but also about the millions of people in this world who go to bed hungry at night. Any religion that professes concern regarding the souls of men and fails to be concerned by social conditions that corrupt and economic conditions that cripple the soul, is a do-nothing religion, in need of new blood.[26]

This was King's frequent indictment of fundamentalist Black and white religionists of America. According to King, ministers representative of this one-sided thinking in the face of grave racial and economic injustices say that those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern. King described their Christianity as a spiritually moribund religion only awaiting the day to be buried.[27] Such religion the Marxists like to see as an

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[25] King, "A Challenge to the Churches," 6.

[26] King, Strength to Love, 89.

[27] King, "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," 6.

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opiate of the people. Knowing that their religious posture is "unbiblical" which makes a "distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and secular," King asked, "Who is their God?"[28]

Freedom

When King spoke of freedom, he had in mind the need for oppressed Black people to be freed from the chafing chains of segregation and discrimination. So King taught that man, whatever his condition, is free. He has the power to decide and to choose. Thus, King saw freedom as one of the salient characteristics of any person.

The essence of man is found in freedom. This is what Paul Tillich means when he affirms "man is man because he is free," or what Tolstoy implies when he says, "I cannot conceive of a man not being free unless he is dead . . . What is freedom? It is, first, the capacity to deliberate or to weigh alternatives."[29] Because man is made in the image of God, humankind, Black or white, is entitled to freedom. For King, regardless of a person's interpretation of the image of God, freedom is a derivative of it.

> The imago dei has been interpreted by different thinkers in terms of fellowship, reason and conscience. An abiding expression of man's higher spiritual nature is his freedom. . . . He is free to deliberate to make decisions to choose between alternatives. He is distinguished from animals by his freedom to do evil or to do good

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[28] King, Why We Can't Wait, 91.

[29] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 98.

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> and to walk the high road of beauty or tread the low road of ugly degeneracy.[30]

Consequently, the Black person should be free to participate in all areas of American life. Yet, this freedom is always within our destiny. Man's freedom "always operates with the limits of an already determined structure"--destiny.[31]

Concept of Sin

Individual Sin. King disagreed with those who take sin lightly and affirmed that the corruption in human nature is the result of sin. As a Black American, he recognized that sin was not only destructive in its individual dimensions, but more so in its collective dimensions. So, King argued, although man is uncomfortable with the concept of sin, a realistic Christian doctrine of man concludes that man is a sinner. Man's sinfulness is not due to his creatureliness. The cause of his sin must not be attributed to his nature. Man sins because he chooses to sin. For King, there is a corruption in man's will. This corruption in man's will came about by man's separation from God, a "tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness."[32] This estrangement is three-dimensional: separation from self,

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[30] King, Strength to Love, 90.

[31] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 98.

[32] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Negro is Your Brother," Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1963: 81.

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neighbor and God.

Having the backdrop of segregation in mind, King said that white America has used as its choice for evil the low road of segregation. Thus, white America has distorted the image of God in Black people. King stated that although man has the divine image, man does not always choose to do good. There is a strong tendency in man to choose to deny the image of God in him, and go the low road. Man's proneness to evil is clearly portrayed by King:

> When we lay our souls bare before the scrutiny of God, we admit that though we know the truth, yet we lie, we know how to be just yet we are unjust; we know we should love yet we hate, we stand in the juncture of the high road yet we deliberately choose the low road. . . . We see the tragic expression of Immoral Society in the doctrine of white supremacy which plunges millions of black men into the abyss of exploitation and in the horrors of two world wars which left battlefields drenched in blood, national debts higher than mountains, men psychologically deranged and physically handicapped, and nations of widows and orphans.[33]

With the optimism found in King's Black Church culture, King has not lost faith in straying white America. King believed that white America has a conscience that calls it back to God. An apt description of man's condition is, "All we like sheep have gone astray." Indeed, for King, man is a sinner in need of God's forgiving grace. Some superficial analysis of man's nature would see this assessment as pessimistic. But King affirmed that this assessment of man is not deadening pessimism; it is

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[33] King, Strength to Love, 91.

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Christian realism. Man tends to live on the low plains of life, yet, while in the dust of wrong, "something reminds him that he is made for the stars." There is a conscience that calls man to God. King saw this as "God's unbroken hold on us." This hold will "never permit us to feel right when we do wrong, or to feel natural when we do the unnatural."[34]

Collective Sin. King called attention to the grave danger of collective sin, namely segregation. In King's thinking there is nothing cosmic about the origin of evil. Evil came about because of man's sin--the corruption of his will. Evil is the result of man's tragic misuse of his freedom. This constitutes a turning away from God. On the individual level, sin is "expressed in tragic lust and inordinate selfishness." On the group level, sin is manifested where men are willing to sacrifice truth for self interest. But for King, sin in its collective forms is more dangerous and far-reaching in its consequences. It is seen in "imperialistic nations crushing other people with the battering rams of social injustice." What is war but another manifestation of evil.[35]

King believed that man, collectively in the form of Western nations, has committed some of the gravest sins in

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[34] Ibid., 91.

[35] Ibid., 59.

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oppressing the down-trodden peoples of the world. Therefore, Western nations carry a collective guilt for this evil. But there was hope for man as individuals, groups or nations. Thus, in the language of the prodigal son, King exhorted the white Western world.

> Man has strayed to the far countries of secularism, materialism, sexuality and racial injustice. His journey has brought a moral and spiritual famine in Western civilization. . . . The heavenly Father speaks to Western civilization today: "In the far country of colonization more than one billion six hundred million colored brothers have been dominated politically, exploited economically and deprived of their sense of worth. Come to your self and return to your true home of justice, freedom and brotherhood and I will joyously take you in. . . But it is not too late to return home."[36]

King reasoned that America, with all its ideals for liberty and freedom enshrined in its constitution, had strayed farther than the other western nations. But, like the prodigal son of Biblical fame, forgiveness and reception await a repentant America from the hand of a loving Father. Hence, King's address to America:

> In the far country of segregation and discrimination you have oppressed nineteen million of your Negro brothers, binding them economically and driving them into the ghetto, and you have stripped them of their self-respect and self-dignity, making them feel that they are nobodies. Return to your true home of democracy, brotherhood and the fatherhood in God, and I will take you and give you a new opportunity.[37]

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[36] Ibid., 92.

[37] King, Strength to Love.

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Having been born and lived in the South, King came to see segregation as the most brutal expression of collective sin. For him, segregation was the cruelest of evils which man had encountered on the North American continent. It is the thing that plagued Black Americans everyday from dawn to dusk; it is the evil that plagued them all their lives from the cradle to the grave. Segregation stunted the Black man's growth and disfigured his personality, leaving him with life-long psychological scars. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to rid America of this scourge of his people. America was rightly criticized by King when he observed that despite America's great progress in the areas of science, wealth and might, when we turn to the question of progress in race relations, we face one of the most shameful chapters of the American scene. Thus, King spoke of the harsh realities of segregation:

> We must face the melancholy fact one hundred years after emancipation proclamation, the Negro is still dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated. Negroes North and South still live in segregation, housed in unendurable slums, eat in segregation, pray in segregation and die in segregation.[38]

King argued against segregation not only in terms of social morality or social ethics, but in terms of Biblical theology. King postulated that since man is created in the image of God for communing with God and others, anything

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[38] King, "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," 1-2.

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which destroys that communion is sinful and evil. Racial segregation destroys communion between Black Americans and white Americans. Consequently, segregation directed against the image of God, is a gross evil. King explained:

> The tragedy of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than as ends and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons. To use the words of Martin Buber, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship.[39]

King cited the Southern-landed gentry's reference to Negro employees as "hands" or "my Negroes." This, he said, betrays the thing quality assigned the Negroes under the system. He continued:

> But man is not a thing; he must be dealt with not as an "animated tool" but as a person sacred in himself. To do otherwise is to depersonalize the potential person and desecrate what he is. So long as the Negro or any other oppressed group is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse.[40]

There is a second reason why King found segregation morally wrong. He perceived it as a system which "deprives a man of his freedom, that quality which makes him man. The very character of the life of man demands freedom." There are three qualities of freedom which make it indispensable to a balanced life. They are the capacity to deliberate, to decide, and to be responsible. The

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[39] Ibid., 8.

[40] Ibid., 8-9.

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immorality of segregation is seen in its cutting of one's capacity in each of these areas. King felt that this basic capacity of the Black American's manliness has reduced him only to a manlike creature which carries out "motor responses" and functions. This, King believed, has stultified the Negro's personality.

King contended that the wounds inflicted by racial segregation on the Negro are just as damaging in its physical as well as psychological effects. His observation in this regard is penetrative:

> This is why segregation has wreaked havoc with the Negro. It is sometimes difficult to determine which are the deepest wounds, the physical or the psychological. Only a Negro understands the social leprosy that segregation inflicts upon him. Like a nagging ailment, it follows his very activity leaving him tormented by day and haunted by night. The suppressed fears and resentments and the expressed anxieties and sensitivities make each day a life of turmoil. Every confrontation with the restrictions against him is another emotional battle in a never-ending war. Nothing can be more diabolical than a deliberate attempt to destroy in any man his will to be a man and to withhold from him that something which constitutes his true essence.[41]

For King, segregation cannot then be compatible with Christianity.

> It injures one spiritually. It scars the soul and distorts the personality. It inflicts the segregator with a false sense of superiority while inflicting the segregated with a false sense of inferiority.[42]

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[41] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 98-99.

[42] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Current Crisis in Race Relations," New South, March 1958: 10.

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King could not associate segregation with the progressive forces of the world, forces enlightened by the best in civilization and Christian nurture. The "cancerous disease" of segregation must be associated with primitive and pagan societies. Is not segregation a bankruptcy of the human family? King would answer, "Whenever racial segregation exists it is a tragic expression of man's spiritual and moral bankruptcy."[43] Indeed, for King "the problem of race is indeed America's greatest moral dilemma" from which Christians must not rest until it is "banished from every area of American life."[44] King gave not only moral reasons but Biblical and theological reasons why segregation is wrong.

In sum, "Segregation is morally wrong and sinful. It is established on pride, hatred and falsehood. It is unbrotherly and impersonal. Two segregated souls never meet in God. Segregation denies the sacredness of human personality."

As a Christian realist who has faith in God and confidence in man, King felt the problem of racism and other forms of evils in America could be solved. How must they be solved?

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[43] King, "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," 5.

[44] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," Advance, 28 Feb. 1958: 26.

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Sin is Overcome by Nonviolence

In their long struggle to overcome racism, Blacks have tried many methods. King believed nonviolence was the best means to conquer the evil of segregation. King was convinced that evil can be cast out of this world. But there is a problem in Christian thinking that prevents a solution. This problem is to be found in what King called the "lopsided reformation theology"--the "Calvinistic concept of total depravity of man." This view "so concentrated on the wickedness of man that it overlooked his capacity for goodness."[45] Consequently, advocates of this view reason that depraved man should not be expected to create a just society. Such Christians think they should depend on God alone to solve society's problems. According to King, if God does everything man asks him for, "God becomes little more than a cosmic bellhop who is summoned for every trivial need. . . . Therefore we must never feel that God will through some breathtaking miracle or a wave of the hand cast evil out of the world."

King felt that the Black American should cast away this lopsided view of himself, assert his manhood and fight against racism and segregation. Despite the known ravages of sin, King believed that the image of God still remains in man. It is not totally effaced. So, King affirmed:

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[45] King, Strength to Love, 121.

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> Man is no helpless invalid left in the valley of total depravity until God pulls him out. Man is rather an upstanding human being whose vision has been impaired by the cataracts of sin and whose soul has been weakened by the virus of pride but there is sufficient left for him, to lift up his eyes unto the hills, and there remains enough of God's image for him to turn his weak and sin-battered life toward the great physician, the curer of the ravages of sin.[46]

As the leaders of the Black Church during slavery cooperated with God in slave rebellion and the underground railroad, King called Blacks to cooperate with God and remove the cancer of segregation from the American soil. In King's reasoning, the answer to the casting out of evil is not found in the thesis of man's self-sufficiency to solve all problems, or in the antithesis of the great God eliminating all life's evil for man. But the answer to the casting out of evil is found in the synthesis of cooperation of man and God.

> Both men and God made one in a marvelous unity of purpose through an overflowing love as the free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin.

Although King directed his remarks to Blacks, he included other people of goodwill who united with Blacks to overcome racism in America. So, King saw himself and other Christians of goodwill working with God to overcome evil. Like Amos, Jesus and St. Paul who carried "thus saith the Lord" of the Gospel far beyond the boundaries of their

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[46] Ibid., 123.

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homes, so he and other prophetic voices were cooperating with God to destroy evil by crying in American cities and towns, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."[47]

Although evil is "recalcitrant" and characterized by "fanatical resistance" to the forces of good, King knew that God is working in history to destroy evil and, consequently, evil will not survive. As men of goodwill--the forces of good--fight against evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil, in various forms, may vaunt itself and succeed for awhile but it is against the law of the universe for evil to have permanent success. The success of evil is temporary and illusory because, according to King, there is a check point in the universe which renders evil incapable of organizing itself. Based on his faith in a God of justice, King predicted the defeat of racism. He then drew on the Exodus motif of Black American religious culture to announce victory for the oppressed Blacks all over the world. Sooner or later evil's self-defeating quality will show itself. Consequently, for King, the Pharaohs of an evil system of segregation and the forces of injustice may employ legal maneuvers, economic reprisals and even physical violence to hold Black Americans in the Egypt of segregation, but it will fail; for the God of the Exodus, the God working in history, is on the

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[47] King, Why We Can't Wait, 88.

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side of justice. In King's vision, there will always be a "Red Sea passage in history which brings the forces of goodness to victory . . . and marks the doom and destruction of the forces of evil."[48]

Christ and the Cross--Love and Justice--Black Hope

As a Black Baptist preacher, King believed that victory over racism could only be achieved through the help of Jesus. In Martin Luther King's Christology, the cross of Christ is a symbol of the victory of good over evil. Thus, King stated:

> Christianity clearly affirms that in the long struggle between good and evil, goodwill eventually emerge as victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, inexorable forces of good. Good Friday must give way to the triumphant music of Easter. Degrading tears choke the sprouting necks of growing wheat for a season, but when the harvest is gleaned, the evil tares will be separated from the good wheat. Caesar occupied a palace and Christ a cross but the same Christ so split history into A.D. and B.C. that even the reign of Caesar is dated by his name.[49]

Thus, King saw hope for the oppressed people of the world in the victory of the cross. From the cross came love and justice which would light the world made dark by collective sin.

Nature of Love

Shot through the thoughts of Martin Luther King is love. King reasoned that mankind, having a common Father-

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[48] King, Strength to Love, 63.

[49] Ibid., 59.

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hood in God, should not be so divided. This Fatherhood of God and its corollary, the brotherhood of men, could be partially achieved in history. Hence, King's fundamental ethical norm was the Christian understanding of love. This love taught in the Sermon on the Mount was exemplified in the life of Jesus dying on the cross and forgiving his enemies.

However, loving the enemy has long been preached in the Black Church. From the days of Richard Allen of the eighteenth century to Martin Luther King's time, the Black Church and its people employed love as a survival technique. These religious beliefs of which King spoke so eloquently were not taught him by his sojourn in white academia. Therefore, James Cone's observation is cogent in stating that:

> . . . [King] did not arrive at his convictions about God by reading white theologians. On the contrary, he derived his religious beliefs from his acceptance of Black faith and his application of it to the civil rights struggle.[50]

When King spoke of love, he was not giving a treatise on love. As a Black American, he was utilizing a method to fight white racism. Thus, in King's mind, love is joined with other tools of the struggle--nonviolent protest and boycotts. For King, the goal of love was freedom and liberation for his oppressed people. James Cone puts King's theme of love in context when he said:

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[50] James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 11-12.

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> The heart of his beliefs revolved around the ideas of love, justice, liberation, hope and redemptive suffering. The meaning of each is mutually dependent on the others. Though love may be appropriately placed at the center of his thought, he interpreted it in the light of justice for the poor, liberation for all, and the certain hope that God has not left this world in the hands of evil people.[51]

King claimed that he learned from Gandhi that love and nonviolence can be used as a method for social change. The truth is, it was not only through Gandhi but through a Black, Howard Thurman, in Jesus and the Disinherited that Jesus' concept of loving the enemy expanded in King's mind to include the white American nation. Thurman suggested that disinherited people can use love to deal with the enemy state by viewing the enemy not as an impersonal state, but as persons.[52] Lerone Bennett, Jr., one of King's biographers, stated that King reread Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited after the Montgomery boycott began.[53] A reading of Jesus and the Disinherited clearly shows that King digested Thurman's conceptions on fear, hate and love--

King thought that if white America could have love, taught by Jesus, at the center of its heart, the race problem would be solved. Hence, for King, what philosophers sought after with a view of finding the meaning of ideas similarly expressed in King's writings.life, he found

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[51] Ibid., 12.

[52] Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 95.

[53] Lerone Bennett, "When the Man and the Hour," 95.

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in love. Therefore, in an imaginary letter, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," King said:

> What is the summum bonum of life? I think I have the answer, America. I have discovered that the highest good is love. This principle is at the center of the cosmos. It is the great unifying force of life. God is love. He who loves has discovered the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality; he who hates stands in immediate candidacy for nonbeing.[54]

Schooled in the Black Church which puts great importance on love taught by Jesus, King appealed to the consciences of white Americans to love the Black man because God loves him. King reinforced his concept of love, agape:

> Agape is more than romantic love, agape is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative redemptive goodwill to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when one rises to love on this level, he loves men not because he likes them, not because their ways appeal to him, but he loves every man because God loves him. And he rises to the point of loving the person who does an evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies."[55]

In a very human and realistic illustration, King continued to explain the differences:

> Like is sentimental and is pretty difficult to like somebody bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children, it is pretty difficult to like congressmen who spend all their time trying to

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[54] King, Strength to Love, 133.

[55] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 5-6.

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> defeat civil rights. But Jesus says to love them, and love is greater than like.[56]

King mentioned some characteristic of love, agape, and recommends it for person-to-person or intergroup relationships. First:

> Agape is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good but the good of his neighbor. Agape does not begin by discrimination between worthy and unworthy people or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for others sake. . . Consequently, the best way to assure oneself that Love is disinterested is to have love for the enemy-neighbor from whom you can expect no good in return, but only hostility and persecution.[57]

Second, agape is oriented towards the other person's need. In this illustration, King must have had in mind the impatience of Blacks who constantly bear the insults and abuse of white America:

> Since the white man's personality is greatly distorted by segregation and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears.
>
> . . . Agape recognized that all life is interrelated. All men are brothers. If one harms his brother, he is harming himself to the same degree for all humanity is involved in a single process.
>
> Another characteristic of agape: it is not weak and passive, it is active and strong.[58]

In King's thoughts, agape has two functions. It can serve as a regenerative principle, regulating individuals'

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[56] Ibid., 6.

[57] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 104-105.

[58] Ibid., 105-106.

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moral relations. Love also functions as a guiding principle in political and social justice.

Man's response to society's problems is characterized by fears, prejudice, pride and irrationality. These are barriers to genuine intergroup relationships. For King:

> These dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.[59]

King thought of a transcendental experience that rises above man-made laws which assured justice to a higher law which produces love. According to King, the laws of society can touch only the eternal nature, but regenerative love reaches the "inner attitudes, genuine person to person relations and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify."[60]

Love in the Social and Political Order

King saw love not only as a regenerative principle guiding individuals' moral and social behavior but, for him, "Love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world."[61] After King's intellectual odyssey to find a weapon to deal with societal social problems, he

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[59] King, Strength to Love, 23.

[60] Ibid., 22.

[61] King, Nobel Lecture, 21.

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concluded that love "was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."[62]

The success of the Montgomery bus boycott, King acknowledged, was not due mainly to Gandhian philosophy, but to Christian love. In support of this preceding statement, Lerone Bennett, Jr. pointed out that in early interviews with King by Robert E. Johnson, manager of Jet magazine, and Tom Johnson of the Montgomery Advertiser, King did not mention Gandhi as one of his social and political mentors.[63] King stated that in the early days of the Montgomery movement the phrase most often heard was "Christian love." Therefore, King said:

> It was the sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.[64]

King said that nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the Montgomery movement "while love stood as the regulating ideal. In other words Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method."[65]

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[62] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 97.

[63] Bennett, "When the Man and the Hour," 24.

[64] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 84.

[65] Ibid., 85.

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It was this love that King employed as a weapon to break down the strong barriers of segregation and oppression against Black Americans in the South. King tested love against Governor George Wallace's unmitigated hatred for desegregation, against Bull Connor's persistent cruelty, against the fanatical resistance of Southern leaders at the plea of a modern Moses to set God's people free from racial segregation. Beaten and kicked many times by the Southern police system, forced to endure roach-infested jails, King still loved the enemy. It is against this backdrop that King affirmed:

> Agape is not weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. Agape is a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality. Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community. It does not stop at the first mile, but it goes the second mile to restore community. . . Therefore if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love.[66]

King's spirit of love, as the guiding principle of his civil rights movement, was consistent with his concept of the image of God in man. King believed that "there is within human nature an amazing potential for goodness." The image of God in man is not totally gone. "There is something within human nature that can respond to goodness. Even the worst segregationist," King affirmed, "can become

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[66] Ibid., 105-106.

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an integrationist."[67] So, in the struggle for social justice, King's use of the weapon of love was calculated to reach the goodness of the white man's nature, the image of God and, consequently, change him from a segregationist to an integrationist, from an unjust person to a person willing to practice justice and righteousness in American society.

But this love was not theoretical and vague. Agape had the goal of immediate justice for Black Americans. Love was the chosen instrument to achieve justice for America's oppressed.

Meaning of Justice in the Early Part of the Movement

Martin Luther King's crusade for justice must be seen in the setting of the Black Church. He inherited nonviolent protest action from the N.A.A.C.P. (1909) and the Congress for Racial Equality (1942)--organizations which were allied with the Black Church. Some of his fellow Black Baptist ministers who blazed the trail of nonviolent protest action for social change were Howard Thurman and Adam Clayton Powel, Jr. In 1944, Powel led a four-year inonviolent direct action campaign, which secured approximately ten thousand jobs for Harlam Blacks. Powel embraced the religious tradition of the Black Church which

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[67] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 7.

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refused to separate the Christian Gospel from the struggle for justice in society.[68]

Consequently, the goal of King's civil rights movement was justice for the oppressed Black Americans. He chose to reach this goal in the spirit of love. As King put it: "Love at its best is justice concretized."[69] For King, justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. King constantly integrated love and justice as he fought relentlessly against the racial and economic exploitation of his people.

At the earliest part of King's movement, when he spoke about injustice, he meant segregation in the South and disenfranchisement of Black Southerners. Later, injustice on King's lips came to mean poor housing, low paying jobs, poor school facilities for Black Americans, ill health, and the downright poverty of nearly fifty million Americans of all races. Consequently, the first ten years of his movement, justice for King was the desegregation of the South and Southern Black Americans exercising their right to vote.

Thus, segregation and its attendant evils and disenfranchisement--twin evils of the South--were highlighted in King's celebrated speeches at the Lincoln Memorial. Hear his demand for justice at the Prayer Pilgrimage:

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[68] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 10.

[69] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 90.

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> Give us the ballot and we will no longer have to worry the federal government for passage of the anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the Southern States and bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence. Give us the ballots and we will transform the salient misdeeds of blood thirsty mobs into the abiding good deeds of orderly citizens. Give us the ballot and we will fill our legislative halls with men of goodwill and send to the sacred halls of Congress men who will not sign a Southern Manifesto because of their devotion to the Manifesto of Justice. Give us the ballot and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will "do justly and love mercy," and we will place at the head of Southern states governors who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the divine. Give us the ballot and we will quickly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's Decision of May 17, 1954.[70]

Again in the March on Washington speech at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963, in reference to the Emancipation Proclamation, King said:

> One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation, and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own home.[71]

In the book, Why We Can't Wait, King gave a graphic description of some of the elements which comprise injustice in the Southern United States:

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[70] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom," Address, 17 May 1957, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 1.

[71] Martin Luther King, Jr., "March on Washington Speech," 28 Aug. 1963, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 1.

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1. America was creeping at horse-and-buggy pace to give Blacks the privilege to get "a cup of coffee at a lunch counter."

2. The Negro suffering from the "sting of segregation" by "Vicious Mobs" lynching their mothers and fathers and "drowning your brothers and sisters at whims."

3. Police brutally maimed and killed Blacks.

4. Blacks smoldered in "air tight cage of poverty."

5. The knowledge that some facilities were only white, distorted and embittered the personalities of Black children.

6. The refusal of lodging at motels while on long journeys forced Blacks to sleep in their cars.

7. The psychological scars inflicted on Southern Negroes when their first name becomes "nigger," their middle name becomes "boy" and last name, "John."

8. The perennial battle against "nobodiness" imposed on Blacks by racial segregation.[72]

King argued that white Americans have never experienced these lamentably inhuman conditions. That was why they could not understand why Blacks can't wait any longer for freedom.

Church Aiding Justice

By 1967, the year Where Do We Go From Here was published, King came to recognize that racial injustice was so endemic to the American people that forces beyond the influence of Black Americans were needed to eliminate it.

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[72] King, Why We Can't Wait, 81.

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Needed was the white church which deals with the religious sentiments and values of the people. The liberals also were needed to influence the public media which, in turn, could influence public opinion.

Hence, King called upon the white church--itself guilty of the perpetration of racism but heir of the Judeo-Christian heritage of justice--to help its Black brothers realize justice in the society. For King, no institution was better able to do this than the church which in slavery used religion and the Bible to support the slave system. It was argued that the Negro was by nature inferior because of "Noah's curse upon the children of Ham." The Apostle Paul's dictum became the watch word: "Servant, be obedient to your master."[73]

King reasoned that if the Christian church in America acknowledged that this teaching represented dark days and dark deeds in the history of this country, then the church has the opportunity and duty to lift up its voice like a trumpet and declare unto the people the immorality of segregation. According to King, human life is a reflection of divinity and:

> . . . every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in man. The undergirding philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together.[74]

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[73] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 73.

[74] King, "For All - A Nonsegregated Society," 3.

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King felt that the church would be working for justice in showing that segregation makes for inequality. The Plessy versus Ferguson Decision of separate but equal educational facilities robs Black American children of both quantitative and qualitative facilities for education, King contended. As the spirit of separate facilities for white and Black children still stark the land, the church should be active in working for the implementation of the 1954 Supreme Court Decision on Education.[75]

He argued that while many "professional hate groups" of power and prominence in the South disseminate false ideas about the inferiority of the Negro race, the church must show the unreasonableness of this popular belief. King stated that the church can show that the idea of a superior or inferior race is "a myth that has been refuted by the best evidence of anthropological sciences."[76]

The church can help the cause of justice for Black Americans when it reveals that:

> It has been proven that low academic, health and moral standards are products of environment, not of race. It can show that when given opportunities, Negroes do as well as anyone else."[77]

For King, unfortunately, the Christian church today

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[75] King, "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," Address, n.d., King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 2.

[76] Ibid., 10-11.

[77] Ibid., 11.

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has not tried "to make the ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian religion relevant on the question of race." Instead, King charged: "It has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted, and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed."[78]

Instead of the church being a "thermostat" that transforms the moves of society, it has become merely a "thermometer" that records "the ideas and principles of popular opinion."[79] In the name of justice, King challenged the churches to live out their prophetic role in the practice of Judeo-Christian religion and to be extremists like Amos for the extension of justice. If the church fails to do this, it will lose its authenticity.[80]

While it is to King's credit that he had great faith in the church, King expected too much from the institutional church. He failed to recognize that the church reflects the thinking of its society and acts out of its institutional role. It is more institutional than prophetic. The church seldom acts in a prophetic role.

Practical Goals of Justice

By 1965, after major gains in the desegregation of the South and the Right-to-Vote Bill, justice, for King, took

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[78] King, Were Do We Go From Here, 96.

[79] King, Why We Can't Wait, 91.

[80] Ibid., 88-92.

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on a different complexion. New elements were added to what King called justice. The first priority in King's civil rights movement was to reclaim the dignity of Black Americans by the removal of racial segregation in the South. King showed why this was necessary:

> A considerable part of the Negro's efforts of the past decades has been devoted, particularly for the South, to attaining a sense of dignity. For us enduring the sacrifice of beatings, jailing and even death was acceptable merely to have public accommodations. To sit at a lunch counter or occupy the front seat of a bus had no effect on our material standard of living, but in removing a caste stigma it revolutionized our psychology and elevated the spiritual content of our being. . . Instinctively, we struck out for dignity first because personal degradation as an inferior human being was even more keenly felt than material privation.[81]

Having won those battles to remove the psychological scars of segregation, King was now concerned with Black Americans sharing in America's wealth. America should use its wealth in creating a more just society, King said. He agreed with the Swedish economist, Gunner Myrdal, that improving the economic lot of Blacks would enrich America rather than diminish her. In this context, King quoted Myrdal in An American Dilemma:

> . . . the Negro problem is not only America's greatest failure but also America's incomparably great opportunity for the future. If America should follow its own deepest convictions, its well-being at home would be increased directly. At the same time America's prestige and power abroad would rise immensely. The century old dream of American patriots that America should give to the entire world its own freedoms and

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[81] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 87.

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> its own faith, would come true. America can demonstrate that justice, equality, and cooperation are possible between white and colored. . . America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity.[82]

By the mid-1960s, King's demand for justice took on a note of great urgency. To the facetious question being asked by some influential whites: What more does the Negro want? King's answer was:

> Absolute and immediate freedom and equality now, not in Africa or some imaginary state, but here in this land today. . . .[83]

Put in another way, the Negro wants now the "basic rights he ought to have inherited automatically centuries ago, by virtue of his membership in the human family and his American birthright."[84]

According to King, Black Americans want to be "absorbed into our economic system. . . ." The Negro was not "struggling for some abstract, vague rights, but for concrete and prompt improvements in his way of life."[85] Consequently, in general, King considered this concrete improvement--economic justice for Blacks--should include full employment, open housing, integrated schools and proper health care.[86]

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[82] Ibid., 84.

[83] King, Why We Can't Wait, 131.

[84] Ibid., 32.

[85] Ibid., 135.

[86] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 110-116.

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But, in particular, King advocated that the government of the United States give special compensatory measures to Blacks for their years in slavery and exploitation. The aim of these measures would serve as the moral and practical way to bring the Negro's standard up to a realistic level.

King then proposed a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, our veterans of the siege of denial. King reasoned that the same principles which gave rise to the Marshall Plan and the G.I. Bill of Rights should bring to fruition his plan for the disadvantaged Blacks of this country. There was precedent for this, King argued, in Nehru's India giving special attention to their untouchables--a long despised people of India. In Nehru's words: "This is our way of atoning for the Centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people."

America, King reasoned, had greater resources than India and should equally grant special compensatory measures to its so-called untouchables--Black Americans.

King's second proposal was for full employment which was conceived for neutralizing the perils of automation. King felt that automation was most devastating to unskilled and semiskilled Negroes.

A third recommendation for the improvement of Negroes, King suggested, was the setting up of a social apparatus on a large scale. This social apparatus would be directed to help the unfortunate learn "basic social skills at a

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functional level--the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, of applying for jobs, of exercising the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote."[87]

King made a fourth proposal--a guaranteed income which would be pegged to the "median income of the society, not at the lowest level of income." King wanted this guaranteed income to be dynamic, and proposed that "it must automatically increase as the total income grows." King made it clear, however, that this proposal was not a "civil rights" program for it would benefit all the poor, "including the two-thirds of them who are white."[88]

White Liberals and Justice

Unlike Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, King always sought the support of whites in his search to improve Black Americans' lot. He recognized that implementation of his new civil rights thrust--open housing, full employment, the Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged--was far more difficult to achieve than desegregation and voting rights. According to King, this was to be expected because "it is sociologically true that privileged classes rarely ever give up their privileges without resistance."[89] Hence, King underscored the Black revolution's need for white liberals. Speaking to Blacks, King insisted:

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[87] King, Why We Can't Wait, 139.

[88] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 164-165.

[89] King, "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," 15.

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> We cannot win our struggle for justice all alone nor do I think that most Negroes want to exclude well-intentioned whites from participation in the Black revolution.[90]

So, King called for the aid of "white liberals," speaking through "the government, the church, voluntary welfare agencies or the civil rights movement." These liberals were needed, not to bless tokenism, nor pity Negroes, but to unite as good men to bring about the birth of a society united by justice. King described the tendency of white liberals to go only part of the way in civil rights and to treat the movement with apathy and indifference when they are most needed.

In this connection, King stated his case uninhibitively:

> The white liberal must see that the Negro needs not only love, but also justice. It is not enough to say, "we love Negroes, we have many Negro friends." They must demand justice for Negroes. Love that does not satisfy justice is no love at all. It is merely sentimental affection, little more than what one would have for a pet. Love at its best is justice concretized. It is not conditional upon one's staying in his place or considered respectable. He who contends that he "used to love the Negro, but . . ." did not truly love him in the beginning, because his love was conditioned upon the Negroes limited demands for justice.[91]

King then summoned the support of white liberals to affirm absolute justice for the Negro which means that the

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[90] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Testimony of Hope," Playboy 14 (Jan. 1969): 194.

[91] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 89-90.

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Negro must have his due. For King, the Negro's due in concrete terms is "having a good job, a good education, a decent house and a share of power."

The white liberal must rid himself of the notion that there can be tensionless transition from the old order of injustice to the new order of justice. King asked the white liberal to see that the oppressed person who agitates is not the creator of tension. He merely brings out the tension that is already alive.

White liberals, in participating in the struggle for racial justice, must realize that Negroes want to be their own spokesman, to be in the primary leadership in their own organizations. Consequently, liberals must be supportive in secondary roles in the civil rights movement.

King said that he wanted white liberals in the civil rights movement, irrespective of misguided shouts, "We don't want you." King saw this clamor as the abuse of the concept of Black Power. He reminded white liberals that "the issue is injustice and immorality. This was the issue before the shouts of 'Black Power' came into being and this will be the issue when shouts die donw," King said.[92]

Blacks and Political Power

The Black American achieving political power was seen by King as a part of the "Negro's due." Economic justice will come when there is a "more equitable sharing of

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[92] Ibid., 89-94.

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political power between Negroes and whites."[93] King thought that political power was one of the goals for which the Black man should strive. For him, the call "to Black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals" is always relevant. Advocating the need for political power among Blacks, King observed:

> Power, properly understood is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice.[94]

King called for change in the Negro's "powerless morality versus white immoral power. As a consequence in his struggle for racial justice, the Negro must seek to transform his condition of powerlessness into creative and positive power." This power will issue in the block vote of Blacks in elections of city, county, state and national elections. King stated his position thus:

> One of the most basic weapons in the fight for social justice will be the cumulative political power of the Negro. I can foresee the Negro vote becoming consistently the decisive vote in national elections.[95]

King believed that the "black vote will ultimately help unseat the diehard opponents of equal rights in Congress."

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[93] King, "A Testimony of Hope," 232.

[94] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 37.

[95] King, "A Testimony of Hope," 232.

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King did not subscribe to solo performance; hence, he called on the church to cease its high blood pressure of creeds and anemia of deeds and help the cause of justice. Thus, he challenged the church to be active:

> It must seek to keep the channels of communication open between the Negro and the white community. It must take an active stand against the injustice that Negroes confront, in housing, education, police protection and in city and state courts. It must exert its influence in the area of economic justice. As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community, the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils.[96]

Throughout King's works there are strong notes of universalism--the embracing of all races. As his civil rights movement reached toward the middle of the 1960's, King was calling for the economic salvation of the poor whites of the South, whom he described as the derivative victims of slavery. Repeatedly, King called for the poor whites and poor blacks of the South to unite. He reasoned, Southern whites will see the need of unity with poor Blacks because "the social advantages which softened the economic disabilities of Southern poor whites are now beginning to lose some of their attractions as these whites realize what material benefits are escaping them."[97]

It is well-known that just before his death, King was mobilizing "the dispossessed of this nation--the poor both

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[96] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Church and the Race Crisis," Christian Century 75 (Oct. 1958): 1141.

[97] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Let Justice Roll Down," The Nation 200 (15 March 1965): 273.

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white and Negro . . . urban and rural to initiate and lead a sustained, massive, direct-action movement in Washington."[98]

Cessation of the War in Vietnam--Justice

King's enlarged vision of justice led him to oppose the war in Vietnam. King saw an inconsistency in the democratic principles of America and its involvement in what he called an unjust war. However, King's main opposition to the Vietnam war was primarily because he was a Black man fighting for the racial and economic liberation of his Black people. The Vietnam war clearly undermined the economic success of the civil rights' trust. Consequently, on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, King took an unequivocal stand against the war in "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam."

For him as a preacher, moral vision must be linked to the opposition of the Vietnam war. We see the primary reason for his Vietnam stance in his opening statement:

> It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor - both black and white - through the Poverty Program. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political playing of a society gone mad on war, and I know that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and

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[98] Martin Luther King, Jr., Trumpet of Conscience (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 59-60.

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> skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.[99]

As a second reason for his opposition, King called attention to the immorality and inconsistency of an American foreign policy which put thousands of young Black men beside whites to die and be crippled recklessly in a foreign country, when those Blacks could not live on the same American streets with whites.

It was King's conviction that a just and consistent posture on violence was his condemnation of it among Blacks in the ghettos of America, as well as the government's involvement in Vietnam. It was logical then for King to describe America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[100]

Ministers of the Gospel, true representatives of the ministry of Jesus Christ must bring good news for all men which includes communists and capitalists, Blacks and whites. Hence, King felt he had a ministry of peace to Vietnam to call for sanity and understanding from the American government and the Vietnamese people.

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[99] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives, ed. Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmands, 1967), 116.

[100] Ibid., 117.

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It is of interest to this writer that King rose to the full stature of a Black liberation preacher in America when he warned the American government of being on the wrong side of every revolution around the world--always in the name of protection from communism. King believed in a positive justice. For King, America's "greatest offensive against communism is to take the offensive action in behalf of justice." That offensive action, according to King, lies in America going out into the world and recapturing the revolutionary spirit by declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism. For the solution to problems--national and international--must come through love by way of "nonviolent coexistence" and not "violent co-annihilation."[101]

Justice was not anything theoretical but concrete; it was not for the future, as he wanted it now. This justice was for the poor Blacks and the poor whites of America. Thus, Cone has rightly stated that King's vision of 1963 turned into a nightmare when he became convinced that President Johnson's "War on Poverty" failed because of the expenditures of the war in Vietnam.[102] Whether it was on the international or national scene, justice, for King, must be achieved through nonviolence.

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[101] Ibid., 130.

[102] James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 13-14.

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Nonviolence and Its Application

A Method of Love

Consistent with his doctrine of God as creator and its concomitant view of man--the image of God--King believed that evil which seeks to depersonalize, impoverish and destroy the Black man must be resisted. As has been mentioned earlier, racial prejudice in North America takes on the form of corporate evil. Therefore, for King, "a righteous man has no alternative but to resist such an evil system."[103] But this evil should not be resisted with any non-Christian means. Non-Christian methods used to gain Christian ends are morally wrong. King believed that "means must be as pure as ends." For him, "ends and means must cohere" for "in the long run of history, immoral destructive means cannot bring about moral and constructive ends. . . ."[104] So, King essayed to use Christian love taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to meet the forces of hate. "Our sin," he said, "must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding."

Thus, King fused the nonviolent resistance of Gandhi and the spirit of love taught by Jesus and found the result "the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his

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[103] King, "Playboy Interview," 123.

[104] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 4.

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struggle for freedom."[105] This love ethic made it possible for Black Americans to hate the system of segregation and still love the segregationists who they saw as victims of an evil system. King pointed to Black resolve, "While abhoring segregation, we shall love the segregationalist."[106] This method of nonviolence infused with love was so effective that King, in the height of the civil rights movement, could declare:

> Love is the most desirable power in the world. This creative force so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ is the most potent instrument available to mankind's quest for peace and security.[107]

So, with this conviction King warned: "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. History is replete with the bleached bones of nations that failed to follow this command."[108]

Philosophy of Nonviolence

In King's schema, nonviolence has similar characteristics as agape, love as he defined it. Nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards. King explained, it does resist. It is devoid of physical aggression, but the nonviolent resister is always seeking to persuade his opponent that he is wrong. The method of nonviolence is passive

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[105] King, "An Experiment in Love," 13.

[106] King, Strength to Love, 40.

[107] Ibid., 40-41.

[108] King, "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom," 3.

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physically, but strongly active spiritually. It is not passive nonresistance to evil, it is active nonviolent resistance to evil.

The practice of nonviolence makes for friendship and understanding among opponents, because nonviolence practitioners do not seek to defeat or humiliate their opponents. The nonviolent registers often express their protest through civil disobedience or boycotts, but they realize that these are not ends in themselves; they are means to awaken a sense of moral shame in their opponent.

King was always mindful of the sacredness of the human personality. Consequently, one of the aspects of his passive resistance is that it should be directed only against "the forces of evil rather than persons, who happen to be doing the evil. It is evil that the nonviolent register seeks to defeat not the persons victimized by evil." So, when the Blacks of Montgomery were fighting against injustice, the passive resisters were instructed that they were not fighting against the white people of the city but an evil system." King said then:

> The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory it will be not merely for fifty thousand Negroes but a victory for justice and forces of light. We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may be unjust.[109]

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[109] King, Stride Towards Freedom, 103.

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King's doctrine of man is brought to bear on his philosophy of nonviolence. King taught that in man the image of God is never totally gone. Consequently, there is something within the human nature that can respond to goodness. Thus, the nonviolent movement was always appealing to the "amazing potential for goodness" within human nature with a view to have a person live out his higher nature, the image of God.[110]

According to King, love avoids external physical violence and also internal violence of the spirit. King defined this aspect of nonviolence:

> The nonviolence register not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. The nonviolence register would contend that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter of indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.[111]

Civil Disobedience

The concept of nonviolence resisting evil, logically, led King to assume the posture of civil disobedience against an evil system. King's stance on civil disobedience was based on the moral philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine's ideas of law, precedents in

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[110] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 6-7.

[111] King, Stride Towards Freedom, 103.

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American history, and the Bible. King's basic rationale for civil disobedience to an evil system says:

> . . . It is as much a moral obligation to refuse to cooperate with evil as it is to cooperate with good. Noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as the cooperation with good.[112]

Answering the logical question of inconsistency in advocating the need for all to implement the Supreme Court decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in schools and his view on breaking some laws of the country, King replied:

> The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Consequently, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is not law at all."[113]

In explaining the difference between just and unjust laws, King cited for authority also God's moral law and the accepted wisdom of St. Aquinas:

> A just law is man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: "An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

So, King drew a logical conclusion:

> All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the

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[112] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 7.

[113] King, Why We Can't Wait, 82.

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> personality, . . . it is morally wrong and sinful.[114]

King knew from experience in the South that, through an unjust voter registration system, thousands of Negroes could not participate in the exercise of their democratic and constitutional right--voting for candidates of their choice. So, King made his explanation of these two laws concrete enough to include disenfranchisement of Black Americans in the state of Alabama. "Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws." He continued:

> An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. . . . A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties in which even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?[115]

Therefore, the civil rights workers who practice civil disobedience are not anarchists. They obey just laws and disobey unjust laws. They do not evade the law. Segregationists on the other hand evade the law and defy the law by holding onto segregation at any cost. Their attitude

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid., 83.

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can lead to anarchy. King felt that the individual who disobeys the law openly because his conscience dictates that it is unjust, and is willing to be imprisoned until the law is altered, is expressing the very highest respect for law. King then cited precedence for civil disobedience in American history:

> Our nation in a sense came into being through a massive act of civil disobedience, for the Boston Tea Party was nothing but a massive act of civil disobedience.[116]

King then drew other examples of civil disobedience from the Bible and Christian history:

> It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchanezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pains of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.[117]

Meaning of Suffering in the Struggle

Traditionally, nonviolent protest has been one of the methods Blacks employed in dealing with racism. One of the articles of the nonviolent registers' faith is a willingness to accept suffering without striking back. According to King, the nonviolent resister is willing to accept violence if necessary, but never to give it. He goes willingly to jail when necessary. King said the reason for

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[116] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 8.

[117] King, Why We Can't Wait, 84.

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the nonviolent resister's willingness to suffer to gain political rights is his firm belief that "unearned suffering is redemptive." For King, suffering has "tremendous educational and transforming possibilities." He then quoted Gandhi:

> Things of fundamental importance to people are not secured by reason alone but have to be purchased with their suffering. . . . Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his hearts which otherwise shut to the voice of reason.[118]

Pervading King's thought is the consciousness that suffering may even lead to the ultimate suffering but if it comes in the struggle it would be redemptive. King felt that if Blacks should die fighting racism, they would have died for their children's psychological health. So, he said:

> But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing can be more Christian.[119]

Thus, the nonviolent resister is unafraid because in "his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship." So, with love and determination, he can say to his bitter opponent in the words of Martin Luther King:

> We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your

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[118] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 103.

[119] King, "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom," 6.

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> unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. . . .[120]

King was enamored by the Gandhiism concept of suffering. However, a doctrinaire nonviolent posture made nonviolent civil rights workers willing victims for the violent whites who were committed to Black genocide. If whites were not sure what would be the response of Blacks, they would be less bold in unleashing unwarranted violence on civil rights workers. So, there is a weakness in King's posture of Blacks enduring suffering from white violence.

Goal of Nonviolence--

Community

Community, as the goal for which the civil rights movement strove, is omnipresent in King's works. King repeatedly stated that his movement was not seeking to humiliate the whites, it was not seeking to triumph "over the white community" because reconciliation, community, integration was the goal beyond freedom and justice. Repeatedly, King reminded his audience that boycotts, civil disobedience, demonstrations were only means "to shame the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority."

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[120] King, Strength to Love, 40.

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Always for King "the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform the opposers into friends."[121]

King chose nonviolence, a method of love, for he looked beyond boycotts and desegregation to a meaningful experience of both Black and white Americans. So, King worked toward the goal of reconciliation and community based on changed attitudes of white Americans.[122]

Coming out of the Black Church where Jesus is the center of faith, King thought community and reconciliation could be accomplished by Americans putting faith in Christ. Hence, for King, the cross of Christ was the symbol of victory and, therefore, of community. So, he affirmed:

> The Cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. Therefore, if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love.[123]

Summary

Although Martin Luther King, Jr. drew on sources from white Americans and Europeans to explain his ethical teaching, he was always conscious of his blackness and

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[121] King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 30.

[122] King, Strength to Love, 22.

[123] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 105.

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black orientation. J. Deotis Roberts rightly states:

> Without the black church tradition there would not have been a Martin Luther King, Jr., as we know him. Without a religious experience that steeled black suffers against hardships and inflamed their consciences against injustices, King would not have emerged as if it were from the womb of the black church. Crozer and Boston only refined what he brought with him. Furthermore, his effectiveness as leader among blacks, even among whites may be explained only in this way.[124]

It is a fact that King used the tools of academia, but he used these intellectual tools of highly recognized scholars to explain his stance on ethical issues. The ethical themes of love, justice, nonviolence and freedom are concepts long-residing in the Black Church community. Many of these have been the basis of hope and survival by Black people living in a harsh, alien white society. In the midst of a segregated society, Black Christians have learned to deal with whites with a love informed by the Cross of a suffering Jesus.

From Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1874, to Howard Thurman in Jesus and the Disinherited, love has been recommended as a way of dealing with whites. This theme was mediated through the Black Church to Martin Luther King.

No theme has been more prominent throughout the history of Black religious thought than the justice of God. Black Americans have always believed in the presence

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[124] Roberts, "Christian Liberation Ethics," 233.

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of God who will punish the wicked and liberate the victims of oppression. These themes King took up from the Black church and infused them with new dimensions to hammer out freedom and hope for his oppressed people.

James Cone states how the Black Church shaped King's ethical thoughts:

> King often used the writings of Tillich, Niebuhr and other white thinkers to express his own ideas about the interrelatedness of love and justice. But it was his internalization of their meaning in the Black church tradition that helped him to see that "unmerited suffering is redemptive."[125]

As has been already mentioned, nonviolence as a method for social change was in the Black Church community from the 1930's. But King was the first to use it so widely and effectively. King used all these elements of liberation in the Black Church as an effective vehicle to convey his thoughts on social change in America.

James Cone summed up the orientation and intention of King's ethical thought when he observes:[126]

> The decisive impact of the Black Church heritage upon King can be seen in his ideas about justice, liberation, love, hope and suffering. He took the democratic tradition of freedom and combined it with the biblical tradition of justice and liberation found in Exodus and the Old Testament prophets. Then he integrated both

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[125] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 12.

[126] Ibid.

[127] William R. Jones, "Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin or Malcolm?" Chicago Theological Register 73 (Winter 1983): 42-47.

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> traditions with the New Testament idea of love and suffering as disclosed in Jesus' cross. And from all three, he developed a theology that was effective in challenging all Americans to create the beloved community in which all persons are equal.[127]

The relevant question is: How successful had King been in realizing his goal, the beloved community, through his ethical teachings? King had reasonable success but possibly more could have been accomplished except for some circumstances in American society. King was rather overly optimistic in his confidence that white America would change from racism to integration. There is much truth in William Jones' analysis of King in suggesting that King was mistaken in thinking that the suffering and death of innocent nonviolent resisters would arouse the conscience of white America to jettison racism. White America has been half-hearted on this question because of: (1) their definition of Blacks as subhumans, and (2) whites sharing power with Blacks at all levels of the society would reduce their entrenched power interests.

In Gandhian language, King often spoke of totally disrupting the system through nonviolence. For Gandhi, this could have been effectively done in India where Indians

In Gandhian language, King often spoke of totally disrupting the system through nonviolence. For Gandhi, this could have been effectively done in India where Indians were in the majority and their opponents, the British, were in the minority. However, the reverse situation exists in

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America. Blacks are in the numerical minority. Therefore, nonviolence could only be fully successful if King and Blacks received massive and continued white support. The lack of King's full success is partly due, as described by Jones, to the fact that: "Few whites are ready to put their bodies and wallets on the line to further Black freedom."[128]

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[128] Ibid., 43.

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CHAPTER 5

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Sermon Style: A Continuity in the Black Preaching Tradition

Context and Content of Black Preaching in America

Origin and Style of Black Preaching

White speakers generally gather a body of theoretical information and from this they base their discussion or sermons. On the contrary, King, as a Black preacher, preached out of his Biblical and ethical convictions drawn from the Black suffering. We must see King as a Black preacher successfully preaching within the Black Church tradition.

King saw the Black Church and Black preaching as his heritage, and stated that:

> I am many things to many people; civil rights leader, agitator, troublemaker and orator, but in the quietness of my heart I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being, my heritage, for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher![1]

Cone spoke of that cultural heritage where Blacks "sang and preached our theology in worship and other sacred

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," Ebony 20 (Aug. 1965): 77.

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contexts." Of King's speaking and writing, Cone perceptively observes:

> Everything he said and wrote sounds like a black sermon and not rational reflection. To be sure, King finished first in his class at Crozer and also wrote a Ph.D. dissertation at Boston. . . . But it is significant to note that he did not adopt the style of theological presentation from any of his white theological mentors. He may have referred to white theologians and philosophers when he needed to explain his views to a white public, but the style of his presentation was unmistakably from the tradition of black preaching.[2]

Black preaching, to which Blacks' ears were attuned, greatly impacted King's hearers. Black people all over America took King seriously because his message of freedom and hope was "reflected in the movement and rhythm of his voice."[3]

This paper's interest is to find the origin of and reason for this Black preaching style that King so effectively used. Negroes were sold into slavery in America from the seventeenth century. But no serious thought was given to their conversion by the English and Roman Catholic Christians. The planters felt that the enlightenment of the slaves might inspire them to the status of freemen. Missionary enterprise among the slaves was spearheaded by Episcopalians. This missionary thrust was strengthened by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign

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[2] James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology--Black Church," Theology Today 40, no. 4 (Jan. 1984): 417.

[3] Ibid.

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Parts, founded in London in 1701. The first successful preacher in this endeavor was the Rev. Samuel Thomas of Goose Creek Parish in South Carolina. He began his work in 1695 and, by 1705, he reported instructing about 1,000 slaves, many of whom could read the Bible distinctly. But some whites seriously objected to the slaves participating in the Lord's Supper.

However, other clergymen soon joined Thomas in Christianizing the slaves. Much progress was achieved in the missionary movement so that in 1743 at Charleston, South Carolina, a special school was established to train Negroes for participation in this missionary work. This school aimed at teaching the rudiments of education and the doctrines of the church. It served not only young workers trained for missionary enterprise but adults in the evenings. After many years of success, the school was closed in 1763.[4]

In New England the Quakers, under the leadership of John Woolman, took a serious interest in the evangelization of the Negroes. They also saw active labor among the Negroes in the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. Their antislavery stance earned the wrath of public officials, the planters, and the Anglican clergy whose interest was tied to the planter class.[5]

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[4] Woodson, 5-7.

[5] Ibid., 14-18.

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Despite the good work of Anglican clergymen, Thomas Bacon and Jonathan Boucher, Negroes were baffled by the ritualistic services of the Anglicans. According to George Woodson, the slaves also were not enamored with the simple worship service of the Quakers. The people in chains wondered how matters so mysterious could be reduced to such ordinary and simple formula. The task then of thorough proselytizing the Negroes was left to other sects. Woodson's observation on this subject is relevant:

> During the latter part of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, there were rising to power in the United States two sects, which, because of their evangelical appeal to the untutored mind, made such inroads upon the Negro population as to take over in a few years thereafter the direction of the spiritual development of most of the Negroes throughout the United States. These were the Methodists and the Baptists.[6]

Although these two groups were vigilant in working for the salvation of slaves, they took halfhearted measures for the abolishment of slavery. Neither the Methodists kept its antislavery declaration of 1796 nor the Baptists their antislavery action of 1789. These actions were never binding and soon lost their sting.[7] Therefore, Blacks were not drawn to their services primarily because of their abolitionist stance. It was their worship patterns that appealed to the Africans.

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[6] Ibid., 22.

[7] Ibid., 26-27.

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Bruce A. Rosenberg suggests that the revivalist religion of New England was transported to the South through the passionate preaching of George Whitefield with its vehement pathos and what his critics described, "histrionics." However, the Second Great Awakening 1800-1801, drew large numbers of Negroes under the banner of Baptists and Methodists. These sects' preachings were accompanied with "barking," "jerking," loud shouting, and dancing in divine services, especially at Camp meetings. This pattern of worship attracted both Blacks and whites of the South. The Baptists and Methodists accentuated feeling as a sign of conversion and this doctrine was readily accepted by the poor class in society.

The hypnotizing effect of Baptist preaching was so impelling that many slaves quickly took up preaching on their own. The "Black exhorters" later added other dimensions to white Methodist and Baptist preaching. Rosenberg believes that the chanted sermon as practiced in Black churches is traceable to these "Black exhorters." This preaching greatly affected the slaves in the South after 1801.[8]

Descriptions of George Whitefield's preaching can be helpful in locating the origin of the Black preaching style since his preaching was the salient influence on the pulpit of the Great Awakening. Thomas Bacon spoke of Whitefield's

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[8] Bruce A. Rosenberg, The Art of the American Folk Preacher (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 14-15.

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"incomparable eloquence" which thronged parish churches in England and multitudes in open fields in Philadelphia and Georgia.[9]

Benjamin Franklin said that upwards of 30,000 people were swayed by Whitefield's eloquence in an out-of-doors crowd in Philadelphia. Franklin described one of Whitefield's sermons as follows:

> His delivery was so improved by frequent repetition that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of the voice, was so perfectly well-turned that without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse; a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of music.[10]

On his second trip to America, Whitefield landed in Philadelphia, possibly early Autumn 1739. Upon seeing the eagerness of the people to hear him, he turned his journey to Savannah, Georgia, into a campaign of preaching.[11] It is therefore logical to conclude that thousands of Negroes in North and Southeastern America must have heard him.

Evidently, the Negro slave was attracted to the exuberance and emotional excitement of Methodist and Baptist preaching. Another question needs to be answered. Why were the Negroes captivated by this type of preaching?

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[9] William H. Pipes, Say Amen, Brother (New York: William Frederick Press, 1951), 60-61.

[10] Benjamin Franklin in Annals of American Pulpit, as cited by Pipes, 61.

[11] Ibid., 61.

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The suggestion of the Negro being emotional is very simplistic and unsatisfying.

Pipes drew on many European and white North American folklorists and anthropologists and wrongly concluded that the African was "superstitious," coming from where he lacked "mental stimulus, a temperament that is 'emotional,' of 'bombastic display' with signing and shouting overshadowing 'his ability to reason.'"[12] The above assessment is because of the Euro-American mental penchant to dismiss as worthless anything which they do not have knowledge of and are not familiar with. Observers of the African cultural deposits in the New World--North America, Latin America and the Caribbean--know that the African religious culture is different from the Western white, but not necessarily heathen.

When European Christianity met the slaves it did not stamp its image on a tubla rasa. It met an African people with religious concepts and cultural practices to which they were inseparably bound. The white man, on taking the slaves from West Africa, had hoped the people in chains left everything behind but their working bodies. But the slaves did not arrive on North American shores without their cultural and religious baggage.

In commenting on the origin of Afro-American worship, Rosenberg spoke of "antiphonal performance [which] was

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[12] Ibid., 56-58.

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already in the Negro work-song tradition and was readily adapted into black services."[13] It is in this direction that the ancestral home of Black preaching in America can be found. Certainly there has been a continuity of African culture and religion among New World Blacks. On the question of African cultural continuum in the New World, W. E. B. Du Bois' observation is apropos:

> Religion in the United States was not simply brought to the Negro by missionaries. To treat it in that way is to miss the essence of the Negro action and reaction upon American religion. We must think of the Negro as transplanting to the United States a certain spiritual entity and an unbreakable set of world-old beliefs, manners, morals, superstitions, and religious observances. . . . Of fetishism there is much misapprehension. It is not mere senseless degradation. It is a philosophy of life. Among primitive Negroes there can be . . . no such divorce of religion from practical as is common in civilized lands. Religion is life, and fetish an expression of the practical recognition of dominant forces in which the Negro lives. To him all the world is spirit.[14]

This writer observed African cultural continuity in Jamaica, in the West Indies. The writer grew up near Moore Town, a Maroon settlement in Jamaica.[15] The ancestors of these Maroons are traceable to the Ashanti tribe in Ghana,

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[13] Rosenberg, 16.

[14] W. E. B. Du Bois, The Gift of Black Folk (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), 325-326.

[15] Maroons are descendants of slaves who ran away from the slave plantations and lived in the hills of Jamaica where they successfully fought the British soldiers. The British made peace with them and gave them a measure of independence on their several settlements.

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West Africa, and Maroons carried on their culture unmolested by the mainline English-influenced Jamaican culture. Ring-games and digging songs were regular features of their communal activities. There were African worship services in which Maroons sang antiphonally and danced exuberantly accompanied by Coromanti drums and shakers.[16] Of special interest to the writer was the women lead singers and the special dancers on whom the spirit would come at an advanced stage of the meeting. On reception of the spirit, the special dancer would do dramatic things that he could not do in everyday life. He would also prophesy while in this state.

There were two types of Coromanti services. The first was a general worship service in which there was obviously a festive and celebrative spirit of the people. The music of this service was happy and cheerful. The second service was a healing meeting for a sick person. The singing at this meeting was characterized by mournfulness, and the music was subdued. The lead singers sang with a pathos amidst a low humming by all the participants. At a certain stage of the ceremony, when the spirit came upon one of the designated special dancers, the sick person would be visited by the spirit-possessed.

It is significant that many of the Maroons later became

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[16] A Coromanti drum is approximately three feet long and made of wood with a knocking surface covered with a cured goat skin.

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converts of American Pentecostal churches. Obviously, there are common strands running between the African religion, as practiced in Jamaica, and Pentecostalism. The Maroon religious customs found a home in Pentecostalism with its exuberant and demonstrative worship patterns of singing and shouting and, most importantly, with its spirit-possession.

By and large, it was similar West African slaves who peopled the North American continent. Consequently, when robust Methodism and Baptist fervor met the African mind, there was a blending of the African religion and American Christianity. But the final step for the production of Black preaching was to let Negroes themselves preach Christianity as they understood it. The Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians permitted Negroes to preach the Bible. However, Negro ministers in some places were legally prevented from expounding the Scriptures.[17]

The Episcopalians were very critical of the evangelical preaching among the Negroes, charging that Baptists and Methodists did nothing for the building of the Negro's character. On the contrary, the Negro's point of view was that religious experience did not result from instructions in books. Persons known to be illiterate braved police regulations, attended evangelical meetings, and later

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[17] Pipes, 63.

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preached with such success as to move multitudes.[18]

From colonial days and upward, the names of noted Negro preachers emerge. Among the earliest of these preachers was George Liele of Augusta, Georgia. He was a slave of Matthew Moore, a deacon of the Baptist church. After his conversion, his master discovered that Liele had unusual ministerial gifts and permitted him to preach to both Blacks and whites. He preached successfully to the slaves as far away as Brampton, Savannah, and Yamacran. At the death of his master his enemies imprisoned him, but he was released by Colonel Kirland of the British Army in charge of Savannah. Liele migrated with the Kirland family to Kingston, Jamaica, and within a few years founded the Baptist churches in Kingston and Spanish Town.

Andrew Bryan succeeded Liele in Savannah, Georgia, and erected the first African Baptist Church in Savannah in 1794. Bryan suffered great persecution by whites. Although he was flogged mercilessly and imprisoned on a false charge, he was later freed and exonerated. Bryan's respect grew in that city and later he raised up the Second African Baptist Church in Savannah. He died in 1812,"respected by all who knew him and loved by his numerous followers."[19]

However, the most famous of the Black preachers in the late eighteenth century was Black Harry. Black Harry

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[18] Woodson, 129.

[19] Ibid., 45.

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accompanied Bishop Asbury of the Methodist Church on his preaching tours. Commenting on Harry's preaching ability, Woodson said he "learned from him to preach more forcefully than the Bishop himself."[20]

The following information, given by Woodson, speaks clearly of the eloquence of Black Harry.

> Harry was "small, very black, keen-eyed, possessing great volubility of tongue, and, although illiterate so that he could not read," was one of the most popular preachers of the age. Upon hearing Harry preach, Dr. Benjamin Rush pronounced him the greatest orator in America. Desiring Harry to accompany him in 1782, Bishop Asbury made the request that the way to have a very large congregation was to announce that Harry was to preach, as more would come to hear Harry than to hear Bishop Asbury.[21]

Woodson continues and gives an interesting incident that points up the remarkable pulpit gifts of Harry.

> On one occasion in Wilmington, Delaware, where the cause of the Methodist was unpopular, a large number of persons came out of curiosity to hear Bishop Ashbury. But as the auditorium was already taxed to its fullest capacity, they could hear only from the outside. At the conclusion of the exercises, they said, without having seen the speaker: "If all Methodist preachers preach like the Bishop, we should be constant hearers." Someone present replied: "That was not the Bishop, but the Bishop's servant that you heard." This to be sure had the desired effect, for these inquiries concluded: "If such be the servant, what must the master be."[22]

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[20] Ibid., 48.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 48-49.

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It is evident from this account that both Blacks and whites acknowledged the giant pulpiteer in "small" Black Harry.

John Jasper also is one of the best known representatives of uneducated Black preachers. Jasper had a fertile imagination in the pulpit and, when sharing pulpits with white ministers, Jasper was sensational. The more sensational he became, the more recognition he received from whites. Unfortunately, he was greatly exploited by whites. Pipes suggested that Jasper was considered "best at funerals, where his vivid and spectacular eloquence resulted in an uproar of groans, shouts, fainting women, and people who were swept to the ground to lie in a trance-like state sometimes for hours."[23]

Pipes summed up Jasper's Black preaching as "familiar" and "concrete" in the use of material. He then said of him:

> Often his sermons consisted of stringing together of picture after picture, but at the same time he was keenly logical and tactful, and often made frequent use of humor in delivering his sermons. It was, however, in the face of opposition that he most excelled since his keen invective and satire were skillfully used to crush the opposition. Jasper's oratory swayed, impressed and often convinced those who came to ridicule. He possessed a great imagination combined with logic although his source of information was, for the most part, restricted to the Bible.[24]

However, Black preachers were not all uneducated, and

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[23] Pipes, 64-65.

[24] Ibid., 65.

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there were many talented and educated Black preachers between the years 1830 and 1867. The interest of these ministers was dedicated to the care of a persecuted race. Woodson says of such multi-talented men:

> . . . Negro minister was not only compelled sometimes thus to support himself, but often had to devote part of his time to the problems of education, abolition, colonization and the Underground Railroad."[25]

Blacks were denied the opportunity to be enrolled in college and universities. Yet, as leaders of their people, they were called on to defend their race against white racists who so often declared the Negro an inferior race. The many-faceted work of these enlightened ministers is related by Woodson:

> At the same time, the aggressive Negro ministers were in the midst of a life and death struggle. During the thirties and forties the questions involving the Negroes engaged the attention of almost everybody. The Negro ministers, the then best developed leaders among their people, could not be silent. Inasmuch as men had to be won to the support of the cause, these apostles to the lowly had to appear before the other race in the North as spokesmen of an oppressed people. Preaching was important enough, but there could be no preaching without the liberty to preach . . . Negro clergymen spoke out fearlessly for the emancipation of his race and its elevation to citizenship.[26]

Among others, Bishop Daniel A. Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Rev. Henry Highland Garnet were representatives of these fearless preachers. Payne, a

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[25] Woodson, 146.

[26] Ibid., 148.

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graduate of the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, dedicated his life to the building of an educated ministry in his church. He crusaded against illiteracy in the ministry of his denomination and committed his church to a policy of thorough education for its ministry.[27]

Henry Highland Garnet studied at Oneida Institute under the noble-hearted Beriah Green. At this school Garnet laid the foundation for an eloquent debater, good writer, and powerful evangelical preacher. With reference to his speaking ability, Woodson said:

> He had a complete command of his voice and used it with skill, never failing to fill the largest hall. Soon there was a demand for him as a preacher. . . . Garnet, however, was easily more than a preacher. . . . In 1843, he delivered before the National Convention of Colored Americans at Buffalo, New York, one of the most remarkable addresses ever uttered by man. His contemporary says: "None but those who heard that speech have the slightest idea of the tremendous influence which he exercised over the assembly.[28]

Garnet spoke from a soul on fire as he directed this conference address mainly to his brothers in bonds:

> Look around you and behold the bosoms of your loving wives, heaving with untold agonies! Hear the cries of your poor children. Remember the stripes your fathers bore. Think of the torture and disgrace of your noble mothers. Think of your wretched sisters loving virtue and purity, as they are driven into concubinage, and are exposed to the unbridled lusts of

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[27] Ibid., 150-151.

[28] Ibid., 154-155.

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> incarnate devils. Think of the undying glory that hangs around the ancient name of Africa; and forget not that you are native-born American citizens, and as such you are justly entitled to all the rights that are granted to the freest. Think of how many tears you have poured out upon the soil which you have cultivated with unrequited toil and enriched your blood; and then go to your lordly enslavers, and tell them plainly, that you are DETERMINED TO BE FREE. . . . Do this, and forever after, cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they and not you will be responsible for the consequences. You had far better all die--die immediately, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your prosperity. . . . However, much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come out at once--rather die freemen, than live to be slaves.[29]

For a balanced picture from the soul of Black preachers of the period during and after American slavery, there must be a presentation not only of the vivid imagination of a John Jasper but also of the polished oratory of Garnet--an oratory that could be matched with the best on both sides of the Atlantic.

In summary, Black preaching had its beginnings when the preaching of George Whitefield, the Baptists and the Methodists touched the hearts of Blacks on the American soil. The fire of the Negro's spirit answered the Methodists' and Baptists' evangelical fire--the Holy Ghost. The Black brethren yielded their hearts to Christianity.

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[29] Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves," 94.

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However, when the Afro-Americans came to preach Christianity to their fellow slaves and others, their preaching was of a different hue. The slaves had much to say because they suffered much and felt much. Their preaching was not a copy of the white man's. Their minds, hands, hearts, heads, feet--their all--were in their preaching. It was a soul preaching born from the womb of pain. It spoke of Black souls imprisoned, striving to be free and crushed souls struggling to be made whole. It was out of the struggle and conflict of the souls of Christian slave preachers that Black preaching was born and stamped Black.

Salient Characteristics of Black Preaching

In thinking of the characteristics of Black preaching, we must of necessity think of the preacher and the congregation. William Du Bois introduces us to the Black preacher and his role in the Black community in this observation:

> The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist--all these he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it.[30]

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[30] W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1985), 190.

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James Weldon Johnson points out other aspects of the Black traditional preacher but concurs with Du Bois:

> It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity. He was the first shepherd of this bewildered flock. His power for good or ill was very great. It was the old time preacher who for generations was the main-spring of hope and inspiration for the Negro in America. . . . This power of the old time preacher, somewhat lessened and changed in his successors, is still a vital force; in fact it is still the greatest single force among the colored people in the United States.[31]

Not only the Black preacher but the Black congregation is of importance in the study of Black preaching. The Black congregation provides an atmosphere of freedom of expression in the pulpit and among the people. This freedom also issues in a freedom to change written music. In Black or soul singing the soloist is free to improvise as he/she is moved during the rendition;[32] and music is an integral part of Black worship. There is a sense of congregational cooperation and expectation in a Black worship service that is not seen among whites. Of this Black worship, Johnson tells how he observed "the fervor of the congregation, the amens and hallelujahs, the undertone of singing which was often a soft accompaniment to parts of

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[31] James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones (New York: Viking, 1954), 2-3.

[32] Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 43, 47.

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the sermon."[33] Hortense Spillers speaks to the core of Black worship atmosphere and congregational expectations when she states:

> Some black churches have been known to "rock" with feeling, a phenomenon common enough when "good preaching" and "good praying" perfectly complimented by "good singing" produced a condition of religious ecstasy--the perfect mode for which emotional religion aims.[34]

Students of Black preaching and some folklorists state that Black preaching is intrinsically an oral tradition.[35] The technique has been passed down from one generation of preachers to the next. This process is distinguished from white preaching, historically, where facts and ideas are enclosed in and circumscribed by the written word.[36]

Yet the Black preaching style is not fixed. Styles of Black preaching range from those who proclaim the Gospel from coffins and other spectacular places to others who stand around the pulpit and never move, seldom raising their voices while they stir large congregations. Hence, there is a broad spectrum of styles and mannerisms among effective Black preachers.[37]

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[33] Johnson, 10.

[34] Hortense J. Spillers, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Style of the Black Sermon," The Black Experience in Religion, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 97.

[35] Rosenberg, 96-100.

[36] Spillers, 78.

[37] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 162-163.

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Rhythm. One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of Black preaching is rhythm. Johnson reports his observation of an impressive Black preacher in Kansas City, "He was wonderful in the way he employed his conscious and unconscious art. He strode the pulpit up and down in what was actually a very rhythmic dance. . . ."[38]

Spillers also sees in successful Black preaching joyful rhythms, "dynamics and rhythm, movement and timing."[39] However, some observers of the art of Black preaching do not attribute to rhythm a significant place. On this subject, Mitchell spoke of his observation:

> However, my own observation of thirty years in the pulpit as well as my study of tapes would seem not to give much support to the idea of Black preachers use of rhythm to any great degree.[40]

But Rosenberg, based on his observation of Black preachers, thinks rhythm is an integral aspect of Black preaching. For him, the "first thing the incipient chanting preacher learns that will influence his style is not language but rhythm."[41] Rosenberg reported that the great importance of rhythm was demonstrated to him in Oklahoma City among Black preachers who did not chant. He believes the natural rhythm of Black preachers is traceable

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[38] Johnson, 6.

[39] Spillers, 77, 79.

[40] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 166.

[41] Rosenberg, 76.

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to their childhood experience in church. Consequently, Rosenberg explains:

> Any portrait of the preacher as a young child will show him in church on his mother's lap or by her side on the bench. He will barely listen to the sermon because he can only distinguish a few words and in any event their meaning is lost to him. But he does respond to the music. Seldom do young children in churches I have visited bother with the sermons at all. When the preacher begins they get restless and fidgety, play silent games with the other children and sometimes even sleep. But the singing usually elicits an active response, and very often the children sing along with the music and clap their hands to its beat. And there is often singing--even organized singing--in the home, but never any preaching there. We can see in such circumstances the beginning of natural rhythm; if the young child ever becomes a preacher, his first schooling has been the music of his church with his culture.[42]

This hypothesis proves nothing because all church attendants of any race know that what Rosenberg describes above is applicable to churchgoing children of every race. The search for the origin of rhythm in Black preaching must point back to the African culture and, consequently, the Black man's temperament. Therefore, this writer agrees with James Cone's critique of Rosenberg's book:

> Some interpreters have misunderstood the Black preacher because of the limitations of their conceptual tools of evaluation. I have reference to Bruce Rosenberg's The Art of the American Folk Preacher. The importance of this book is perhaps limited to its inclusion of valuable text of sermons. From my viewpoint and concern, the chief defect of this work was Rosenberg's failure to take seriously, as an interpretive tool, the

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[42] Ibid.

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> socio-religious consciousness of the preachers under investigation.[43]

Repetition. Repetition is one of the elements of Black preaching. An example is George Whitefield who popularized the evangelical religion that won the Negro's allegiance to the Christian faith. Pipes holds up the repetitiveness of Whitfield's delivery technique leaves its mark on the great Black preachers of yesteryears.[44] Rosenberg, after examining Black sermons of various preachers, concludes that the sermons are replete with repetition. He argues that repetition in Black preaching is a memorized unconscious sermonic formula. But he uses the term unconscious because none of the preachers whose sermons he taped acknowledged their use of repetition as a sermonic technique.[45] Sometimes repetition is made use of in Bible texts, aphorisms, and other important statements for emphasis, memory, impact, and effect. The Black congregation takes the Gospel seriously so it is not offended by sermonic repetition skillfully used.[46]

Imagination. Imagination is considered one of the hallmarks of good preaching. This technique has been used so much in Black preaching that it has become a trademark

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[43] James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury, 1975), 249.

[44] Pipes, 61.

[45] Rosenberg, 51-53.

[46] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 168.

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of the Black sermon. Black preachers in the days of slavery and after were not pinned down with given ideas from a book; they made good use of a fertile imagination. "His imagination was bold and unfettered," said Johnson.[47] John Jasper is an apt representative of the imaginative Black preacher although he was unlettered. His speeches were "imaginative, emotional and filled with imagery." According to Pipes, word pictures became the key to open the minds of the Negro audience. "The speaker's information came from life experiences; therefore, his speeches possessed concreteness drawn from experience not abstract ideas from books."[48] The following excerpt from John Jasper's sermon concerning the plagues God set upon Pharaoh shows his imaginative genius:

> I tell yer my brudderin, dis skeme did de business for Piharo! He cum from ridin' one day, and wen he get in de pallis de hole hall is full uv frogs. Dey iz scampering and hoppin' roun' tel dey farly kivur de groun' and Pharo' put his big foot an' squash em on de marbul flo'. He run inter his paler tryin' ter get away frum 'em. Dey wuz all aroun'; on de fin chars, on de lounges, in de pianner. It shocked de king til' he git sick. Jes' den de dinner bell rang an' in he go ter get his dinner. Ha, Ha, Ha! It's frogs, frogs, frogs all aroun'! When he sat down he felt de frogs squirmin' in de char; de frogs on the plates, squatting upon de meat, playin' ovur de bred, an' wen he pick up his glas ter drink de watur de little frogs is summin' in de tumber. Wen he tried to stick up a pickful his fork stuk in a frog; he felt him funnin' down his back. De queen she cried, and mos' fainted an' tol'

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[47] Johnson, 5.

[48] Pipes, 66.

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> Pharo' dat wud quit de pallis befo' sundown if he didn't do somethin' ter cler dem frogs out'n de house.[49]

Role Playing. A common yet important feature of Black preaching is role playing; for example, the speaker assuming the role of God or other characters in Bible narrative, such as:

> "I heard Job saying one day," and
>
> "I heard Paul saying one day."[50]

Similar phrases are recorded in other works: I heard Jesus say the other day where your treasure is, there is your heart."[51]

In a sermon preached at a Black ministers convocation (December 10-13, 1973), role playing was used effectively by N. W. Moore when he put words in the mouths of James and John because they did not want to tarry at Jerusalem:

> No, Master, you must remember you yourself weren't so good at Jerusalem. Do you remember when your friends forsook you and fled? Why not, Master, let us tarry on the bank of Jordan, where the Holy Spirit descended upon you like a dove, and a voice out of heaven said, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:14, KJV) Let us tarry not where we fell down, but let us tarry where we were at our best. He said "I want you to tarry at Jerusalem, to be endued with power from on high."[52]

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Pipes, 77, 80.

[51] Rosenberg, 128.

[52] N. W. Moore, "Tarry Until," Experiences, Struggles and Hopes of the Black Church, ed. James S. Gadsden (Nashville: Discipleship Resources-Tidings, 1975), 92.

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Call and Response. Black culture preaching makes good use of the call-and-response. On this aspect of Black worship, Mitchell observes:

> Many preachers who pause momentarily for breathing or other reasons receive a response from the audience. When a Black preacher quotes the centurion (Matt. 27:55), it is almost obligatory that he pauses after the first "truly" and wait for the congregation to repeat the word. In fact, this may be done several times before the quotation is . . . completed with "this was the Son of God."[53]

Martin Luther King and his audiences made much use of this technique in his March on Washington speech, "I Have a Dream," and also in his Montgomery speech, "We are on the Move."[54] Much more will be said of King's use of this Black culture pattern later in this chapter. Mitchell says that this "pattern has deep roots in African Culture."[55]

Beauty of Language. The Black congregation enjoys the beauty of language--a beauty embedded in the phraseology of the King James Version. Soul preaching demands more rhetorical flair than what is obtained in white middle-class churches.[56] Johnson's assessment of the Black preachers of his day is instructive:

> They were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of the King James English, so when they

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[53] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 167.

[54] Spillers, 83.

[55] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 169.

[56] Ibid., 173.

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> preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect. It was really a fusion of Negro idioms with Bible English.[57]

Johnson believes this device has "some kinship with the inmate grandiloquence of their African tongues."[58] The use of these phrases were not for exhibition as some would think. Johnson perceptively suggested the basis of the Negro preacher's fondness for big words:

> The old-time Negro preacher loved the sonorous, mouth-filling, ear-filling phrase because it gratified a highly developed sense of sound and rhythm in himself and his hearers.[59]

Poetic. Related to the well-tuned phrase is poetic diction. This is derived from southern English and is based on a special, poetic grammar. Poetic diction has certain formulas and combinations such as, "After a while," "I say unto you tonight," "I want you to know this evenin'," "I am glad about it," and "I want to wear the crown."[60]

However, Rosenberg concludes that the great individual talent of the American Black preacher lies not in special diction or formalaic systems but in his ability to compose spontaneously the vocabulary at his command to fit his metric pattern. The Bible, Gospel songs, and the English of the American South provide most of the basic molds; the

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[57] Johnson, 9.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Rosenberg, 101-102.

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preacher fills them as the need arises.[61]

Therefore, good Black preaching is the skillful use of poetic rhetoric. At the height of the Black culture preacher's sermon, his language is not prose but poetry.[62]

Intoning. Of importance to the study of Black preaching is "intoning" or "moaning." Johnson wrote of the old-time preacher's use of it and how it significantly impressed him.

> This intoning is always a matter of crescendo and diminuendo in the intensity--a rising and falling between plain speaking and wild chanting. And often a startling effect is gained by breaking off suddenly at the highest point of intensity and dropping into the monotone of ordinary speech.[63]

Mitchell says that this technique is rarely used today among well-educated ministers. However, some Black congregations of the old school demand it. When its use is employed today, its significance is for inspirational climax or the end of a sermon. However, "intoning" or "moaning" can signal the affirmation of Black identity. Mitchell adds light on the origin of intoning:

> Historically speaking, intonation as a factor of Black preaching style no doubt stems from the African custom of singing almost everything. The history of much of Black Africa was preserved, in the absence of books, in song. So were laws, customs and traditional

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[61] Ibid., 102.

[62] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 173.

[63] Johnson, 10.

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> folk stories and hero tales. There were also highly spontaneous or impromptu songs of various life situations, such as the voicing of grievances.[64]

Voice Modulation. One of the most significant characteristics of Black preaching is the dramatic use of the preacher's voice. In the old days, when the Black preacher was devoid of a wide vocabulary based on printed material, his success lay in the proper use of his voice. The best description of how the old-time Black preacher used his voice is found in God's Trombones. Johnson stated that the Black preacher knew the "secret of oratory" and was "a master of all modes of eloquence." But this success was due to proper use of his voice. A preacher of this vintage "possessed a voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap."[65] He speaks of a Black preacher who was irresistibly impressive, who in a sermon:

> . . . Brought into play the full gamut of his wonderful voice, a voice . . . not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone--the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice--and with greater amplitude.[66]

The author of God's Trombones continues to give the varied mood of the preacher he heard and the effect of his

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[64] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 163-164.

[65] Johnson, 5.

[66] Ibid., 6-7.

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preaching:

> He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded, he blared, he crashed, he thundered. I sat fascinated and more, I was perhaps against my will, deeply moved; the emotional effect upon me was irresistible.[67]

It is the skillful use of the minister's voice in traditional Black sermons like "The Eagle" and "Dry Bones," rather than the material, that made them so effective. The genius of these sermons "lay in their technique of delivery." Emphasizing the importance of oral skills as she saw it in Southern America, Spillers says:

> The minister weaves analogy and allegory into the sermon, comparing and juxtaposing contemporary problems in morality with and alongside ancient problems in morality. These build toward an emotional pitch and climax that are made possible by the minister's sense of timing and dynamics. The delivery of the message is best described by what the minister did with his voice: intonation and pitch, dynamics and rhythm, movement and timing.[68]

Inner Fervor. Black preaching is characterized by inner fervor. The inner fervor of the preacher can aid the techniques mentioned above but, if the preacher is personally involved in his message, he can be of great success without them in the Black pulpit. His preaching reflects what he feels: fear, sorrow, rage, pathos, joy, and love. Black preaching does not aim, like middle-class preaching, at objectivity in a conversational, non-threatening style.

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[67] Ibid., 7.

[68] Spillers, 77.

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The Black preacher and his congregation expect the spirit to rest upon him giving him spiritual unction.[69] When sincere, fervent preaching is coupled with unalloyed good Negro spiritual singing, the result is good Black Church worship.

Woodson, Johnson, and others have shown that the Black minister has carried the burden of representing his race before hostile white America. Because the Black community is conscious of the scars racism has inflicted upon its people, every preaching event, consciously or unconsciously, seeks to affirm Black selfhood.[70]

Although his preaching "instilled into the Negro the narcotic doctrine epitomized in the Spiritual, 'You May Have All Dis World, But Give Me Jesus'," it was the Black preacher who summoned his enslaved people:[71] "Let your motto be Resistance! Resistance! Resistance!"[72] But more often, amidst the troubled waters of racism in the American society, Black preaching "sucks the sting from the rush of time, purges the pain from our memory of the past and banishes the fear of loneliness and death."[73]

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[69] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 173.

[70] Ibid., 36.

[71] Johnson, 3.

[72] Garnet, 96.

[73] Pipes, 71.

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Martin Luther King - The Inheritor and Popularizer of Black American Preaching

King and the Oral Black Preaching Tradition

Of paramount importance in the Black preaching tradition is ethical appeal or ethos--the character of the speaker. According to Pipes, the concept of character for the Negro preacher as a means of persuasion is of great importance. He must be perceived as a "man of God" with a message to men--"the instrument through which the Father talks to His children."[74]

Other students of Black preaching and Black preachers have also observed that Black preachers are conscious of this concept in the Black community. All the Black preachers--"spiritual preachers"--Rosenberg interviewed traced their preaching of the Gospel to a call from God. Further this call came often in their youth and against their will.[75]

The concept of ethos--the preacher as a man of God--impacted Martin Luther King's life. One of his biographers said that King fought against being a preacher, preferring to be a medical doctor or a lawyer. Finally, in his junior at college, he decided to pursue the ministry.[76] With

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[74] Ibid., 90.

[75] Rosenberg, 22.

[76] Lerone Bennett, "When the Men and the Hour," 25, 27.

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reference to Martin Luther King's call to be a preacher from his youth, the senior King said, "He was just seventeen and he started giving the sermon. . . ."[77]

At the completion of his residential requirements for a Ph.D., King turned down three attractive posts from white seminaries.[78] He then returned to the South to preach, thus sharing his people's concept of the preacher's ethos--the man of God called to preach.

Pipes states that the Negro preacher's audience's conception of him as a "man of God" is a persuasive element. So that before the preacher preaches, his people are in a receptive mood, for the preacher did not "just go to school" and then begin preaching; "he is called of God."[79]

Consequently, Black people in the South eagerly listened to King because he demonstrated one of the salient qualities of the Black preacher, ethos--character, the "man of God," an instrument through which the Father speaks to his children.

As the ethos of the Black preacher influenced King, so certain core elements of the oral tradition impinged on his preaching style. There is much truth in the observation that the power of King's delivery and the magnificence of his pulpit style were largely accountable for his

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[77] Ibid., 27.

[78] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 96.

[79] Pipes, 90.

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popularity in the South. This style was "poetic in texture and traditional in delivery."[80] "To get over," to communicate, the old-time Black preacher dramatized the sermon relying on the "tone of his voice" rather than the power of analysis and his vocabulary. Spillers says that this

> . . . technique had been passed down from generation of preachers to the next, places the black sermon in the oral tradition, distinguishing it from the historical tradition where the mentifacts and ideas are enclosed in and circumscribed by the written word."[81]

King knew the oral tradition intimately. No one knew the relationship between style and meaning in the setting of the Black Church any better than King.[82] His sermons were enlightened by an interpretation of the Gospel as he heard it as a youth in Georgia.[83] King's tone and manner of speech were of much importance to Blacks in the South and all over the nation. His effectiveness lay not in the intellectual context of his discourse but the way in which he spoke. On this question of King's manner and tone of speech as an effective tool compared to context, Cone observes:

> That was why King could speak on Plato, Augustine

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[80] Spillers, 76.

[81] Ibid., 77-78.

[82] Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology and Black Church," 417-418.

[83] Spillers, 78.

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> or even Boston's Personalism, about which most blacks know nothing and care even less, and still move the congregation to tears and shouts of praise, even though they did not understand the content of his discourse. What they understood was the appropriate tone. . . .[84]

Consequently, the importance of the Black preacher's voice tone and manner of speech, vis-a-vis content in a sermon, lends credence to Johnson's observation of the old-time preacher, "I have witnessed congregations moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies."[85] That King, the Boston University Ph.D., used the same voice technique as Johnson's old-time preacher demonstrates the persuasive influence of the Black oral preaching tradition, and King's preaching style was in the same oral tradition.

The King James Version of the Bible is integrally associated with the oral tradition of Black preaching. The earliest Black preachers must have committed parts of the Bible to memory, especially the "more dramatic passages of the Old Testament."[86] The imagery of the Bible is at the center of the old-time sermon. In this connection, Arthur Raper, in reference to the Black preacher's use of the Bible characters, remarked, "He talks to his congregation about Moses and Daniel at midday as though he had eaten

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[84] Cone, "Black Theology--Black Church," 418.

[85] Johnson, 5.

[86] Ibid., 4.

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breakfast with them."[87]

The oral Black tradition is kept alive by the shared universal language of the Bible. From the Bible, Black preachers not only get their theology, examples, and imageries but their formulas: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."[88]

As his Black preaching forerunners' sermons were full of Biblical ideas and imagery, so was King's. Thus, in a sermon preached at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, entitled "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," Egypt took on the character of evil and Israel that of goodness. Here are his words:

> Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination. The Israelites symbolized goodness, in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These two forces were in a continual struggle against each other--Egypt struggling to maintain her oppressive yoke and Israel struggling to gain freedom from this yoke.[89]

Even his political speeches were laced with Biblical allegory. Spillers sums up the impact of the King James Bible on King's sermon, "With the King James Bible as a woof of the sermon, the technique of the delivery was the warp,

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[87] Pipes cites Arthur Raper's Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1936), 10.

[88] Rosenberg, 100.

[89] King, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," 2.

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weaving the moral lesson, spinning the emotional moment."[90]

In the context of the Black culture worship service, the congregation anticipated what the preacher is going to say next. The congregation repeats significant words and phrases being preached in joyful approval of the sermon. Mitchell refers to this pattern in worship as "call-and-response."[91] While others describe this technique as "antiphonal service in which the preacher and the congregation are in a symbiotic relationship, the one influencing the other."[92] Still other observers like Johnson described this art as "an electric" current running through the congregation and issuing fervent "amens and hallelujahs."[93]

Certainly, King shared this tradition. In a devotional address preparing the Black people of Montgomery to boycott the city's bus service, this response was in evidence as he intoned, "There comes a time my friends when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair." The audience responded its approval--"keep talking." Again, King said, "And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like a

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[90] Spillers, 77-78.

[91] Mitchell, Black Preaching, 167.

[92] Rosenberg, 104.

[93] Johnson, 5, 10.

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river and righteousness like a mighty stream." The audience not only applauded, but the supportive shout echoed, "keep talking." Note the constant audience participation bracketed in this extract from the address:

> Right here in Montgomery when the history books are written in the future (yes Lord) somebody will have to say "There lived a race of people, of black people, fleecy locks and black complexion," of people (yes) who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights (applause) and thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization. And we're gonna do that. God grant that we will do it before it is too late (Oh yeah!).[94]

This element of response was always noticeable wherever King spoke to Black people. It was very dramatic in King's Montgomery speech, "We're on the Move," when a man who stood by his side called key words when King spoke. Spillers relates the event:

> After picking up the tenor of King's rhythm the man began to repeat the key words: Yessuh, we are on the move! Soon thereafter, the audience had been transformed into a vast echo chamber with King giving out the mainline, i.e., "We can't be dissuaded now . . . and no wave of racism can stop us" and the audience saying with him: We are on the move![95]

The technique is spontaneous, consistent, and technical. With his sense of timing and rhythm, the speaker precisely knows what words to emphasize and, consequently, what phrase the audience will respond to because he has

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[94] Martin Luther King, Jr., Address, Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, Ala., 5 Dec. 1955, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 1-4.

[95] Spillers, 83.

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seen this technique work often for his senior preachers.[96]

The Black sermon is to be heard rather than read. This is certainly in the vein of old-time Negro preaching.[97] For Johnson, the old-time preacher's sermon could not be captured by the pen. The effectiveness lay in modulation of the voice, "His changes of tempo, his pauses for effect, and more than all his tones of voice."[98]

Although Martin Luther King's sermons were well written and the reader can see mentally the picture he was painting, "the most effective observer of King's style is the human ear."[99] Certainly, "the heart will long remember and take joy in the emotional achievement of the Word as King delivered it."[100]

Impact of Intellectualism on King's Sermon

But King was an intellectual giant, taking first place in his graduating class at Crozer and distinguishing himself with a Ph.D. in systematic theology at Boston University. His intellectual achievement stamps his sermons and books. Although King was an accomplished speaker, he wrote his sermons and speeches in detail. An

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Pipes, 141.

[98] Johnson, 10.

[99] Spillers, 78.

[100] Ibid.

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examination of the texts reveals his underlying of certain moral, political or religious lessons he wanted to emphasize. He combined the analysis of academia with the manner and style of his elders. King's intellectual statements in sermons and speeches are well thought out and they inform and clarify the issues at hand.[101]

Philosophical and Theological. In his sermons and speeches, King quoted profusely from philosophers and their philosophies. But on the page there are lines of word imagery which clarify matters for the uneducated. The philosophies found in his sermon and speeches are: (1) direct quotes, and (2) that which comes from the distilled wisdom of his studies--his own. King was comfortable with secular philosophers such as Karl Marx, Nietzche, Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Hobes, and Mill, as well as their counterparts in religion: Walter Rauschenbusch, Edgar S. Brightman, Reinhold Niebuhr, Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Barth, Dean Walter Muelder, Allen Chambers, and L. Harold De Wolf.[102]

In a sermon, "What is Man," King disagreed with the atheistic philosophy of a writer who said that "man is a cosmic accident, a disease on this planet not soon to be cured."[103] For King, the Greeks, under the impetus of

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[101] Ibid., 79.

[102] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 92-100.

[103] King, Strength to Love, 87.

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Plato, were wrong when they taught that "the body is inherently evil and the soul will never reach its full maturity until it is freed from the prison of the body."[104] King countered this lopsided view of man with his own philosophy of man:

> As Christians we must not only think about "mansions in the sky" but also about the slums and the ghettos that cripple the human soul, not merely about streets "flowing with milk and honey" but also about the millions of people who go to bed hungry at night.[105]

To King's support, Niebuhr proved that:

> Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily; individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.[106]

In speaking about communism as an atheistic philosophy, King said:

> Reality cannot be explained by matter in motion or the push and pull of economic forces. . . . Man cannot save himself for man is not the measure of all things and humanity is not God.[107]

Again, King stated:

> Destructive means cannot bring constructive ends because the means represent the ideal-in-making and the-end-progress. Immoral means cannot bring about moral ends, for the ends are preexistent in the means.[108]

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[104] Ibid., 89.

[105] Ibid.

[106] King, Why We Can't Wait, 80.

[107] King, Strength to Love, 94.

[108] Ibid., 95.

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At the end of these quotes concerning the unchristian philosophy of communism, King made two short sentences which image forth and, consequently, explain the dangers of communism. Note how pithy and graphic: "Under such a system the fountain of freedom runs dry." And, "Art, religion, education, music, and science come under the gripping yoke of governmental control."[109]

To show the folly of materialistic atheism which thinks that man's life is determined largely by economic forces, King asked:

> Can man be explained in such shallow terms? Can we explain the literary genius of Shakespeare, the musical genius of Beethoven, and the artistic genius of Michelangelo in materialistic terms? Can we explain the spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth in materialistic terms? Can we explain the mystery and magic of the human soul in materialistic terms?

King answered:

> Oh, no! There is something within man which cannot be explained in chemical and biological terms, for man is more than a tiny vagary of whirling electrons.[110]

At times King's sermons contain pockets of philosophical language but his Black people understood his spirit, if not always his words. To understand intimately his people, King was always mindful of the spirit of Black people expressed in Cone's observation:

> The eschatological hope of freedom is not only an idea to be analyzed in conceptual language

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[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid., 89.

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> of white theologians and philosophers. It is primarily an event to be experienced when God's word of freedom breaks into the lives of the gathered community through the vehicle of the sermon oration. . . . When King spoke of his dream at the 1963 March on Washington, and when he spoke the night before his assassination in Memphis of his hope that we will reach the Promised Land, Black people did not believe him because of the cogency of his logic but rather because of the spirit of empowerment generated by the style of his sermon oration.[111]

Literary. Not only was King brilliant in explicating theology and philosophy, he had a taste for the best in English literature. The garlands of literature adorn his sermons and speeches. As an illustration of King's use of literature, four types can be cited: (1) short prose writing, (2) short historical statements, (3) poems, and (4) negro spirituals and other forms of poetry used for conclusions.

Shakespearean prose was on King's lips to express the humanist's optimism on man:

> What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form, in moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals.[112]

John Donne's immortal statement illustrates King's concept of brotherhood and community:

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

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[111] "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology--Black Church," 418.

[112] King, Strength to Love, 88.

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> . . . any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.[113]

King frequently made use of short historical statements from statesmen to demonstrate that his stance was consistent with the spirit of the founding fathers of the nation. Thus, he quoted Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson in the following, "This nation cannot survive half-slave and half-free. And, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. . . ."[114]

For King, the new Negro of the 1960s was now crying out with the eloquent poet:

> Fleecy looks and black complexion
> Cannot forfeit nature's claim.
> Skin may differ, but affection
> Dwells in black and white the same
> And were I so tall as to reach the pole
> Or grasp the ocean at a span
> I must be measured by my soul
> The mind is the standard of the man.[115]

The next group consists of poetry which King used to conclude his speeches. These were used so often in his many speeches that he evidently committed them to memory. Here are two favorites:

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[113] King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 28.

[114] Martin Luther King, Jr., Untitled Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, 16 Jan. 1966, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 14.

[115] King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 27.

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(1) Truth crushed to the ground will rise again.

(2) Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne
Yet that scaffold sways the future
And behind the dim unknown stands God
Within the shadows keeping watch above his own.[116]

Martin Luther King made ample use of the Negro Spirituals in his sermons and speeches. In his address to a civil rights group on marching against racism in the South, King cited Biblical precedent for such demonstration in the form of a Negro Spiritual:

Joshua fit de battle roun' Jerico
Joshua fit de battle roun' Jerico
And de walls came tumbling down.
Up to the walls of Jerico; dey
Marched with spear in hand. Go blow
Dem ram horns, Joshua cried
Course de battle am in my hand.[117]

Lerone Bennett said that King chose these Negro Spirituals because they bridged the gap between all social classes of Blacks "and exploded in the well of the Negro psyche."[118]

King's Sermon--An Amalgam of the Folk and the Scholar

Folk and the Scholar. King's life was immersed in scholarship and the life of his Black people. For

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[116] Ibid., 31.

[117] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address on the Steps of the State Capitol, Montgomery, Alabama," 25 March 1965, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 66-67.

[118] Lerone Bennett, "When the Man and the Hour," 25.

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Spillers, King's sermon melded the traditions of the folk and the scholar. With the folk, the expressions rise spontaneously, springing from the festive and triumphant. With the scholar, the expression is cerebral, springing from the intellect. To clarify this comparison, Spillers says:

> The intellectual statement is like a scythe, cutting through the weeds of chaos, making them a plain path, while the emotional is like a balm, flowing over troubled waters.[119]

Poetic and Rhetorical. The distinction that is made between scholar and folk is also applicable to rhetorics and poetics. In the former, the speaker arranges his material in presentation to appeal to the intellect. In the later, the speaker arranges his material in presentation to appeal to the emotion. The emotional statement generally represents the poetic mode while the rhetorical statement the intellectual mode. Both were represented in King's sermons and speeches:

> In King the rhetorical style as he learned at the academies met the poetic of his father as he experienced it in the South. In his case . . . the poetry was that of the black sermon. His oratory carried the emotional stuff, while his analysis carried the moral message.[120]

Prophetic. The folk and the scholar so often combined in King's prophetic ministry. King admired the prophets of the Old Testament. As a clergyman involved in fighting

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[119] Spillers, 79.

[120] Ibid., 79-80.

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segregation, King saw himself functioning in the tradition of the prophets. Thus, he quoted copiously from the prophets on many occasions to express his American dream:

> I still have a dream today that one day justice will run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream . . . that in all our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. . . . I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places made straight and the glory of the Lord be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.[121]

King not only quoted the prophets but, like the prophet Jeremiah of the Old Testament, he denounced America for its involvement in the Vietnam war. Here is one of his cutting statements:

> The judgment of god is on America now . . . here we are the richest and most powerful nation in the world. At war with one of the smallest, poorest nations in the world and we can't even win it. That ought to show us that something is wrong.[122]

Again, as an Amos of the Old Testament, King challenged those Americans who were against thorough discussion on Vietnam, "When democracy fails to have healthy debate, it loses its soul."[123]

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121 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon," Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, 24 Dec. 1967, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 4.

122 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Standing by the Best of an Evil Time," Sermon, 6 Aug. 1967, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 6.

123 King, Untitled Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, 16 Jan. 1966, 1.

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Characteristics of King's Preaching Style

We have discussed some of the general characteristics of Black preaching. But King had some distinctive features in his preaching. The traditional gifted Black preacher is known for his "gestures and gesticulations."[124] But King's success lay more in "his sense of euphony and resonance than gesture and movement."[125] King's sonorous voice, like Johnson's old-time preacher, "could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap."[126]

Imagery in Speaking. With reference to the importance of imagery in speech, William Sandford and Willard Yeager said that it is necessary not only to tell your hearers the truth but to render it vivid to the auditors' senses of a striking presentation. To impress his hearers, then, one must have the ability to paint oral pictures. Borrowing from Aristotle, they stated that the hearer should see the things before his eyes. For them, the speaker inspired by strong emotion seems to see what he describes and brings it vividly before the eyes of his audience.[127] King met these criteria of effective speaking for he spoke in clear

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[124] Johnson, 10.

[125] Spillers, 83.

[126] Johnson, 5.

[127] William P. Sandford and Willard H. Yeager, Principles of Effective Speaking (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1928), 124-125.

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pictures and people everywhere were greatly impressed with his oral style.

With regards to imagery in speech, Sandford and Yeager speak of "seven senses" or seven doors to the mind. They are as follows:

> Visual - Recollection of things seen.
> Auditory - Recollection of things heard.
> Motor - Recollection of muscular effort or movement.
> Tactile - Recollection of things touched.
> Gustatory - Recollection of things tasted.
> Olfactory - Recollection of things smelled.
> Thermic - Recollection of sensation of heat or cold.[128]

According to these authors, the images that are most frequent in the speeches of great orators are these, in order of frequency: visual, auditory, and motor.[129] The sermon and speeches of Martin Luther King are replete with these seven images--openings to the mind.

In a sermon captioned "The Prodigal Son," King describes him:

> And watch him as he goes back up the dusty road, that he had once come down. Broke down in spirit. Shabbily clad clothes all wrinkled and dirty. Haven't had a shave for a week. He walks own that road with a little bag on his back, nothing left in it, going on back home.[130]

The visual is expressed in "Shabbily clad clothes all

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[128] Ibid., 125-126.

[129] Ibid., 126.

[130] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Prodigal Son," Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, 4 Sept. 1966, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 7.

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wrinkled and dirty;" the sense of touch is the phrase, "Haven't had a shave for a week," and movement and muscular effort is the phrase, "He walks down the road."

In the same sermon, King speaks of the "stars as they bedecked the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity."[131] Certainly, "swinging" depicts movement and action, and the stars as "lanterns" is a graphic depicting of sight--the visual.

King was against wars as destructive forces of society. In a sermon he described the effects of war thus, "We have seen it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which left battlefields painted with blood. . . ."[132] The picture here is vivid. We can see the blood "painted" all over the battlefields. Spillers says of this phrase:

> The vision is one of destruction made vivid by the phrase: "battlefields painted with blood," as though someone has indeed taken the energy and time to paint the earth in blood. The image betokens the extent of the calamity.[133]

Finally, King associated the summer riots of the mid-1960s as racial neglect in the imagery of the orator, "Our summers of riots are caused by winters of delay."[134] "Summers" and "winters" express a feel of temperature and clearly point to the racial neglect in American society.

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[131] Ibid., 6.

[132] King, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," 1.

[133] Spillers, 82.

[134] King, "The Prodigal Son," 8.

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An examination of King's sermons shows that he uses all of the seven doors to the mind.

Figures of speech are strewn throughout King's sermons and speeches; and the most frequently used ones are personification and metaphor.

Personification. In the sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," based on Ex. 14:30, King gives evil the personality of one grasping and seeking to destroy humanity. Hence for him evil "projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles into the very level of human existence."[135]

King often compares segregation in the South with evil. Hence, when segregation was losing its hold on the state of Alabama, King states, "Alabama has tried to nurture and defend evil, but evil is choking to death in the dusty roads and streets of this state."[136] The meaning of the phrase "is choking to death" is clear and plain even to a small child.

Again, King, in the same sermon, depicts segregation as the brutality of the dying order shrieked across the land.[137] Here is a picture of a personality--racism--dying but crying out stubbornly as if he/she does not want to go. The picture of a dying segregation is striking.

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[135] King, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore." 1.

[136] Martin Luther King, Jr., "How Long? Not Long!" Address, 25 March 1965, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 3.

[137] Ibid., 2.

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For King, "segregation is on its death bed but what is uncertain is how costly will be the funeral."[138]

So many times King personified America. According to him, the civil rights demonstrations aroused the nation's conscience. "But not until the colony of segregation was challenged in Birmingham did the conscience of America begin to bleed."[139] The picture here, like a man's body, is cut and blood is oozing from the wound.

Metaphors. Metaphors were on King's lips more than any other figure of speech. From him, metaphors seemed to have flowed naturally. From the beginning of the protest movement in Montgomery, Alabama, King told his hearers in metaphoric terms that Negroes were now tired of racism:

> There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. . . . When people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. . . When people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November.[140]

The underlined phrases are metaphors--implied comparisons between one or more things.

In the sermon, "How Long? Not Long!," King pictured opportunity for Blacks as "the radiant star of hope." While

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[138] Ibid., 3.

[139] Ibid., 2.

[140] King, Address, Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 Dec. 1955, King Library, Atlanta, 2.

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the Negro's racial plight is painted as "the bosom . . . of night." For King, racism has placed the Negro in "the chains of fear" and "the manacles of death."[141] In the same vein, the Negro is left perishing on "the island of poverty."[142]

The March on Washington speech, August 28, 1963, abounds with King's metaphors. A few examples are mentioned:

> We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.
>
> Our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel cannot gain lodging in motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.
>
> Let us now wallow in the valley of despair.[143]

The picture of America being a bank of justice to which the Negro comes to cash a promissory note given to him by birth is one that must have appealed to the white American sense of justice for the Blacks. Blacks of every class and educational level could understand that they had been given a bad check. Spillers' observations on this theme are helpful:

> The marching to Washington is the same as the cashing of a check against America's justice bank. All the terms of the metaphor refer to banking and money heightening the disparity between the nation's wealth and the black man's poverty. . . . The idea of justice being a bank

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[141] King, "How Long? Not Long!," 9.

[142] Ibid., 8.

[143] King, "March on Washington," 1-3.

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> against which funds are drawn is a very successful and clever idea, reminiscent of other preachers' talk about "heaven's saving bank," where the earthbound Christian stores up his treasures.[144]

It is of importance that King speaks of the default in concrete and materialistic terms:

> We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vault of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check--a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. . . .[145]

The portrait of bodies heavy with the fatigue of sleep, unable to find a resting place because of racism, conjures a picture of persons with heavy loads on their backs who cannot take them off. No one could miss this point.

King's call not to wallow in the valley of despair was a call for his hearers to emulate his faith of love and Christian optimism. Behind this statement could be images of Christian allegory of fall and experience: the Psalmist David, "valley of the shadow of death," and John Bunyan's slough of despond.

But according to Spillers, in King, "valley is also the test and trial. The captivated moved from the valley to the mountain top, from the low places to the 'rock that is higher than I.'"[146]

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[144] Spillers, 90.

[145] King, "March on Washington," 1-3.

[146] Spillers, 93.

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Rhythmic Phrases. The use of rhythmic words and phrases was one of King's effective techniques. In the sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians," King has an introductory phrase which runs, "If the content of this epistle sounds strangely Kingian instead of Paulian, attribute it to my lack of complete objectivity rather than Paul's lack of clarity."[147] Here there is a rhythmic sequence between Kingian and Paulian and objectivity and clarity. Many hearers enjoy a preacher's play on words, making pleasing combination of sounds out of them. Through Paul, King continues:

> I have heard . . . news regarding the fascinating and astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm. I have learned of the dashing subways and flashing airplanes. Through your scientific genius you have dwarfed distance and place time in chains. . . . I have also heard of your skyscraping buildings with their prodigious towers rising heavenward. . . . This is wonderful. . . .[148]

The underlined words bespeak America's great civil engineering feat. The imagery captures the marvel of America's technological genius which is able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Yet this same nation has not been able to live brotherly with its people of color. The punchline of King's rebuke is, "Your mentality outdistances your morality and your civilization outshines your

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[147] King, Strength to Love, 127.

[148] Ibid.

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culture."[149] In sermons and speeches these rhythmic words are prevalent. Thus, in the sermon, "How long? Not Long!," he described the civil rights workers' toil as having walked on "the meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways."[150]

Again, in the "Prodigal Son," America is the prodigal because "twenty two billion of your black brothers are humiliated, segregated and dominated politically."[151] For King, this rhythm sums up racism succinctly.

On January 16, 1966, King again told his people in his home church, using rhythmic words, "We Christians are called to be men of conviction not conformity . . . of moral nobility and not of social respectability."[152] Evidently, King's mouth-filling and ear-filling phrases must have gratified a highly developed sense of sound and rhythm in him and his hearers.[153]

Contrasting Phrases. Another characteristic of King's speaking style is the use of contrasting phrases. In the mid-1960s, King came to feel change would come to Blacks only through their voting. So he challenged his people, "Let us march on ballot boxes until the misdeeds of blood

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[149] Ibid., 128.

[150] King, "How Long? Not Long!," 1.

[151] King, "The Prodigal Son," 8.

[152] King, Untitled Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, 16 Jan. 1966, 3.

[153] Johnson, 10.

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thirsty mobs will be transformed into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens."[154]

Those marchers to whom he spoke on the steps of the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, had experienced the misdeeds of blood thirsty mobs, so they found hope in the promise in imagery that their tormentors can be transformed into orderly citizens.

The March on Washington speech was couched in pictures of contrasts between the good life of whites and poor living conditions of Blacks. Thus, King said, "One hundred years later the colored American lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."[155] The emphasis of the one hundred years deepened the economic gulf between Blacks and whites.

In this picture, King referred to the Emancipation Proclamation as day and slavery as night, "It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity."[156]

Repetition. Repetition is one of the hallmarks of King's speaking techniques. The best examples of this speech pattern are in the Montgomery address, "How Long? Not Long!," and the March on Washington speech.

On March 25, 1965, King spoke to civil rights marchers who had completed a march from Selma to Montgomery. He

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[154] King, "How Long? Not Long!," 6.

[155] King, "March on Washington," 271.

[156] Ibid.

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said he thought that leaders all over the state of Alabama were calling for a return to things as they were before the demonstrators came--a return to normalcy. King said that this is exactly what his people did not want. Using the technique of repetition, King pointed out the dangers of normalcy:

> . . . It was normalcy in Marion, that led to the brutal murder of Jim Lee Jackson. It was normalcy in Birmingham that led to the murder of innocent girls. It was normalcy . . . in Selma that led to the brutal beating of Rev. James Reeb.[157]

In the repetitive technique, King shifted the accent on normalcy to a series of questions on racial intolerance introduced by the phrase, How Long? Not Long!:

> How long will prejudice blind the visions of men? . . . wounded justice lying prostrate on the streets . . . How long will injustice be crucified and truth buried . . . How Long? Not Long![158]

It is evident that when King thundered "how long," his audience enthusiastically responded, "not long." There speaker and audience engaged themselves in a rhythmic symphony of repetitive phrases. But it was in the March-on-Washington speech that King's use of the repetitive device took on epic proportions. First, the plight of the Negro (decades after the Emancipation Proclamation), is vividly portrayed in this repetitive phrase:

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[157] King, "How Long? Not Long!," 8.

[158] Ibid., 9.

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> But one hundred years later the colored American is still not free. One hundred years later, the colored American is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. . . . One hundred years later, the colored American is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.[159]

To an awakened white conscience, "one hundred years later" of racism should have sounded like forever.

The second half of King's August address is a summary of the aim and goals of King's nonviolent struggle. The following demonstrates, among other word pictures, the skillful use of the repetitive device:

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. . . . I have a dream that one day out in the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . . I have a dream today.[160]

On this passage, Spillers' pithy comment is relevant, "The passage moves in contrasts, kaleidoscope of lightness and darkness, betokening the disparity between the two by placing them side by side.[161]

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[159] King, "March on Washington," 271.

[160] Ibid., 274.

[161] Spillers, 94.

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Dramatic Conclusions. Resounding and dramatic conclusions are significant features of King's sermon style. But his conclusions are as many and varied as his sermons and speeches. To illustrate, some examples are cited.

The sermon, "Unfulfilled Dreams," is shot through with the theme, "It was well that it was within thine heart." This is based on 1 Kings 8:18. To conclude this thematic sermon which emphasized having a right spirit rather than perfection, King, the Christian, bared his heart in the following statement:

> I want you to know this morning that I am a sinner like all of God's children, but I want to be a good man, and I want to hear a voice saying to me one day, "it was within thine heart." What is "in your heart" this morning?[162]

To the reader, this conclusion is certainly not stirring but it is a testimony from a sincere preacher.

We see another type of conclusion here in King's sermon, "Who Are We?" The pastor here presents weak Simon Peter and Augustine as representatives of the transforming power of Christ. Then, in conclusion, he rallied his people to the high road of Christian living:

> He can put his hands on you if you will only submit to him and we will truly know who we are. John Oxenham has said to every man. Thou openeth a high way and a low way. The high scul climbs the high way and the low soul gropes the

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[162] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Unfulfilled Dreams," Sermon, 5 March 1968, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 6.

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> low and between on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro; but to every man there openeth a high and a low way. Every man decideth which way his soul shall go. And God grant this morning that each of us will choose the high way.[163]

The prophet and patriot in King is seen in the sermon captioned, "What Is Man?" For him, America, like the Prodigal Son, has strayed away from the path of right. So God's call to America:

> "Come home! I want you to come home! . . . You have trampled over sixteen million of your brothers, but come home I will accept you, and you will be the great nation that I have called you to be!" This is our challenge, and the job ahead.[164]

This call to America to return to the fold of justice and righteousness for all her children was a favorite theme of King.

But then there are conclusions with the ring of the marching, civil rights leader. Such is this in the speech, "How Long? Not Long!" After a sustained series of How Long? Not Long!, King climaxes with the vision of a:

> God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own. . . . Because the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice How Long? Not Long! Because my eyes have seen the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored . . . our God is marching on. Glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah, glory glory

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[163] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who Are We?" Sermon, 5 Feb. 1966, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 11.

[164] Martin Luther King, Jr., "What is Man?" Sermon, 12 Jan. 1958, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 3.

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hallelujah, his truth is marching on.[165]

This conclusion was most appropriate because the speech was at the conclusion of the march from Selma to Montgomery; and the theme was continuing the march for voter registration to effect change in American society.

The conclusion in "Desirability of Being Maladjusted," January 13, 1968, is reminiscent of the traditional Black preacher schooled in the oral tradition. In an address to a group in Chicago, King spoke of the progress of his work in the South and the need to banish racism from the nation. Then King said there is a word in psychology, "maladjusted." This state can lead one to be neurotic and schizophrenic. Perceptively, King declared:

> But I want to say to you that there are certain things within our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted, and which I call upon you to be maladjusted--I never intend to adjust myself to the evil of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. . . . I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism. . . . I call upon you to be maladjusted as Amos . . . to cry out. . . . Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. As maladjusted as Lincoln . . . as Jefferson. . . . As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth . . . to say to men love your enemies.[166]

A sermon on the text, "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind," finds the Black culture preacher in King. The sermon calls for

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[165] King, "How Long? Not Long!," 9-10.

[166] King, "Desirability of Being Maladjusted," Address, 12 Jan. 1958, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 17-18.

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nonconformists who are God-transformed to change the wrongs of society. King, in the sermon, saw himself as one of God's nonconformists for social change in America and concluded:

> . . . Don't let anybody turn you around. We have a song we sing in the movement--"Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." Ain't gonna let criticism turn me around. Ain't gonna let misunderstanding turn me around. Ain't gonna let bombs turn me around. Ain't gonna let threats turn me around. I'm gonna stand right here until the change has come until all history knows that this is God's day. "Be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."[167]

Some of King's best sermons were preached at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist. Obviously, the congregation must have wholeheartedly supported this climax.

Occasionally, a twentieth century prophet receives a glimpse of the promised land, and such was King's view in his last sermon preached at Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968. At the end of his sermon, King spoke about threats being made on his life. Then the twentieth century prophet viewed the promised land and declared, confident and triumphant:

> But it really does not matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I have seen

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[167] King, Untitled Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, 16 Jan. 1966, 14-15.

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> the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight--that we as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I am not worried about anything. I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.[168]

That was the climax of a prophet sermon--a vision of the promised land.

Yet, the greatest speech conclusion of King's career was not the view of the promised land from the mountain top but the words of the March on Washington speech. Here King spoke as a leader and messiah of Blacks whose hopes were pinned on him and his March. The sermon speech was a needed tonic to their battered and bruised feet which symbolically had walked from slavery to this shining hour around the Lincoln memorial. The March on Washington was a most significant watershed in King's civil rights movement. However, it is the climax of this monumental speech that will be discussed here.

There are some phrases in the speech that are of great importance to the climax. They are: "one hundred years later," "I have a dream," and "let freedom ring." King moved from his stress on "one hundred years later" with its context of one hundred years of Blacks' neglect and suffering, to his "I have a dream" of a better day when freedom will "ring" all over America for all Americans.

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[168] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Sermon, 3 April 1968, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 12-13.

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The vast audience identified with the Black man's hope when King declared:

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. . . . I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, that one day down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. . . . This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.[169]

From the setting of hope based on the Constitution, the bells of freedom must ring all over the nation:

> So let freedom ring from the hilltop of New Hampshire. . . . Let freedom ring from the stone mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi and every mountain side. When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every tenement and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."[170]

King's repetitive technique, "let freedom ring," carried the theme, potency, and urgency of the message and thus electrified his vast audience. On this, Spillers' observation is relevant:

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[169] King, "March on Washington," 274.

[170] Ibid.

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> King had moved cryptically and effectively from one phase of the sermon to the next, with the last turned into a powerful evocative and dramatic poem. By using a repetitive device, "let freedom ring" which unites the whole in a resounding song, King heightens and sustains the passage. The audience echoed and kept pace like in Montgomery when King asked: "How Long?" the audience returned with "Not Long!" The crowd returned to him here, like the Southern congregations of old, as a powerful sea wind, resounding and chanting the words of triumph and overcoming.[171]

Coretta Scott King states that during those moments of King's March on Washington speech, he abandoned his notes and spoke from his heart, being lifted and carried "in a surge of emotion to new heights of inspiration."[172] An examination of the advanced text of the speech does not have the refrain "let freedom ring" as a continuing link between the passages. Therefore, this observation and Mrs. King's account demonstrate that King was not glued to his sermon notes but, in the oral tradition of his Black fathers, spoke eloquently, as the occasion demanded, from his heart. It is also significant that King's closing note of this grand oration was that of the Negro Spiritual, "Free at last, free at last! Thank god Almighty, we are free at last!" This former slave psalm of emancipation touched responsive chords in Blacks of every hue and class on that great day.

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[171] Spillers, 93-94.

[172] Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 239.

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Summary

King's preaching reveals that he was a Black man operating out of a Black experience. Contrary to what some whites presume, King was seeking integration in the wider American society but not identity with the white race and culture. He knew who he was, a full-blooded Black man. It is naive to think that a few years in white schools and culture can change a self-assured Black person so that he thinks and operates from a white viewpoint. Hence, an examination of his sermons reveals that King used the file of white academy to sharpen his God-given Black tools. And sharpened they were, but not changed.

King's preaching throughout America and the world encouraged young Black ministers not to cringe and hide from their black sermon style, for they shared the same style with Martin Luther King--the prince of oratory. Further, when Blacks listened to his sermons and speeches, they again found the liberating warmth of the Black pulpit and the pride and dignity in blackness.

As the sermons of his Black elders, King's sermons were tailored for the ear and the heart and not for the eye. For the accent in Black preaching is on what the preacher does with his voice and not on the intricacy of his logic. Consequently, King's written sermons are a contrast to his unpublished sermons as they were preached in Black churches. His written sermons have the "polish" of the academy but not the "soul" of the Black pulpit.

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For example, a sermon in Strength to Love, "Transformed Nonconformist," is a pale copy of another having the same theme which was preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, January 16, 1966. Extracted from the published sermon discourse is what this writer calls the Black element; that is, the sermon discourse in the Ebenezer Church that called up Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Amos, Paul, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Kennedy to testify of their nonconformist experience. This style is of the Black oral tradition. It was King's.

Martin Luther King was a king in the pulpit and his style--the Black preacher's style--reins over the Black pulpit of today and tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 6

Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Message of Liberation

Nature and Context of King's Liberation Message

Liberation from Racial and Economic Exploitation

King's great speaking ability was rightly employed in aiding the liberation thrust of Blacks for racial and economic justice in America. He often spoke of racism that is entrenched in American society. It has wounded Blacks severely and left on them not only psychological but economic scars. In fact, segregation's economic wounds inflicted on Black Americans are still bleeding. Consequently, King's liberation message was aimed at removing both the racial and economic chains which impoverished Blacks in America. King pointed out that segregation conveniently used Negroes as things. A Negro was thought of as "a mere cog in a vast economic machine."[1]

Yet this society, that has so abused the Negro, expects him to lift himself by his own bootstraps. The irony of that suggestion is seen when it is considered that

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[1] King, "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," Address.

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the Negroes were enslaved for approximately 200 years and, upon being freed, were left penniless. King showed the cruelty and deception in white America which mocked Frederick Douglass' suggestion that each ex-slave should be given forty acres of land and a mule. But this same racist government, which refused the slave a meager economic lift, gave land in the West and Midwest to peasants from Europe. Not only did the nation give the land through a vote of Congress, but it established Land Grant colleges to teach the peasants how to farm. Later, these farmers were provided with agents to further their expertise in farming. Yet this same society is hypocritically telling the Negro to pull himself up by his own bootstraps.[2]

Thus, early in King's movement, he called attention to the joblessness and economic insecurity of Blacks. He stated the economic problem Blacks faced in blunt language:

> The tragic truth is that discrimination in employment is not only dominant throughout the South, but is shamefully widespread in the North particularly in the great urban communities which often pride themselves as liberal and progressive centers in government. This discrimination in employment has resulted in an appalling gap between the living conditions of the whites and members of minority groups. For instance, recent statistics revealed that 43 percent of the Negro families . . . earn less than $2,000 a year, while just 17 percent of the white families earn less than $2,000 a year. Twenty-one percent of the Negro families . . . earn less than $1,000

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[2] Martin Luther King, Jr., "In Search of Sense of Direction," Address, n.d., King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 3.

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> per year, while only seven percent of white families earn less than $1,000 a year. . . .[3]

Although these statistical figures are from the 1960s, there is still a vast difference between the earning power of both groups.

King then declared that the act of denying Negroes honest work and fair pay is both immoral and murderous. According to King, "Few practices are more detrimental to our national welfare than discrimination with which the economic order is rife. Few practices are more thoroughly sinful."[4]

It is interesting to note that King used socioeconomic tools to analyze issues in society. However, he has always summed up these issues in man's relation to God. Thus, he describes the Negro's economic problems as "sinful." The gravity of the Negro's economic situation appears more "sinful" when it is compared with America's great wealth and the opportunities enjoyed by whites. This he showed in graphic terms as early as 1963:

> One hundred years later the Colored American lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. . . . The Colored American is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. . . .[5]

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[3] Martin Luther King, Jr., Address, Conference of religious leaders, Washington, D.C., 11 May 1959, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 1-2.

[4] Ibid., 2.

[5] King, "March on Washington," 2.

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For King, this wanton neglect has resulted in Negroes suffering from apathy derived from their powerlessness.[6]

Job discrimination in the marketplace, carried on systematically against Blacks, bred in them a feeling of inferiority. King expressed it thus:

> When an individual is subjected to systematic humiliation, contempt and ridicule as an everyday feature of his life, it is hard for him to think of his tormentors as brothers. Moreover, under the incessant beating of effective propaganda drums, many members of minority groups became convinced of their inferiority. . . .[7]

To ameliorate poverty among Blacks, King proposed that America launch a broad-based Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged Negroes. He argued that this would transform the socioeconomic life of the Negro. This Bill of Rights would involve compensatory measures which could be regarded as settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law.[8] But, in the late 1960s, King's dreams were shattered as he moved through the Northern ghettos of America and saw his Black brothers and sisters "perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity and saw the nation doing nothing to grapple with the Negroes problem."[9]

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[6] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Last Steep Ascent," The Nation 202 (14 March 1966): 288.

[7] King, Address, Conference of Religious Leaders, 3.

[8] King, Why We Can't Wait, 137-138.

[9] King, "A Christmas Sermon," 5.

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Although the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s brought dignity and pride of race to the Blacks, this dignity is corroded with poverty. King insisted that the Negro could not maintain his morale if he is not given an opportunity to earn an appreciable livelihood. The whole American value system is biased towards the wealthy. Thus, in the Negro's search for human dignity, he is hampered by the stigma of poverty in a society whose measure of value revolves around money.[10]

It was very clear to King that Black poverty in America is a derivative of white racism. Hence, King's liberation message was directed not only to the removal of overt racism but the establishment of economic wholeness for Blacks. However, King believed Blacks could take some practical moves to right the economic wrongs in American society. Therefore, in his sermons and speeches, King stressed the need for Blacks to support Black-owned business and withdraw economic support from businesses which are unfair in hiring Blacks. Thus, in his last speech given at Memphis, note the strong emphasis he placed on the issue:

> Now the other thing we will have to do is this. Always anchor our external action with the power of economic withdrawal. Now we are poor people. Individually, we are poor when you compare us with white society in America. We are poor. Never stop and forget that collectively, that means all of us together,

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[10] King, Where Do We Go, 87.

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> collectively, we are richer than all the nations in the world with the exception of nine. Did you ever think about that? . . . We have an annual income of over 30 billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That's power right there if you know how to pool it.[11]

This withdrawal could be done effectively without fanfare and violence. He suggested, prophetically, the spirit in which industrial corporations should be approached:

> We just need to go around to these stores and to those massive industries in our country, and say, God sent us here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda--fair treatment where God's children are concerned. Now if you have not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you.[12]

King summoned his supporters to implement this plan in Memphis immediately on the businesses which had not been fair in their hiring practices toward Blacks.

For King, when Black businesses are successful, the Black community is benefited. In this connection, King summoned Black support for Black institutions:

> . . . We have got to strengthen black institutions. I call upon you to take your money out of the banks downtown, and deposit your money in Tri-State bank--We want a "bank-in" movement in Memphis. So go by the Savings and Loan Association. I'm not asking you to do something that we don't do ourselves in S.C.L.C. . . . We have an account here in the savings and loan association from Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We're telling you to follow what we are doing. Put

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[11] King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," 7.

[12] Ibid.

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> your money there. You have six or seven black insurance companies here in the city of Memphis. Take out your insurance there. We want to have an "insurance-in." Now these are some things we can do. We begin the process of building a greater economic base. And at the same time, we are putting pressure where it really hurts.[13]

But King was often critical of Blacks when self-criticism was needed. He promoted economic self-help among Blacks, which included thrift and learning the technique of wise investment. In his famous "Drum Major" sermon, King said that the drum major instinct makes Negroes ruin their own economy. Here is his analysis of the problem:

> But very seriously, it goes through life, the drum major instinct is real. And you know what else it causes to happen? It often causes us to live above our means. Do you ever see people buy cars that they can't even begin to buy in terms of their income? You've seen people riding around in Cadillacs and Chryslers who don't earn enough to have a good Model-T Ford but it feeds a repressed ago.[14]

This drum major instinct operates in Blacks purchasing cars and houses above what they can afford. The greater problem of always competing with others--trying to outdo the Jonses--was emphasized. For King, this spirit of living above one's means has contributed to the lack of savings and the consequent poverty among Blacks.[15] Thus, King challenged Blacks to see the problem and stop this

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Drum Major Instinct," A Testament of Hope, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 261.

[15] Ibid.

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trait before it becomes more dangerous and destructive.

By the mid-1960s, King's liberation message against racism was loud and clear. But King was not so sure that his message of economics for Blacks was being heard and understood. "Blacks were not interested in handouts or charity," he declared, "they want concrete economic opportunities." This he spelled out in well-nigh Biblical language:

> The Negro today is not struggling for some abstract vague rights, but for concrete and prompt improvement in his way of life. What will it profit him to be able to send his children to an integrated school if the family income is insufficient to buy them school clothes? What will he gain by being permitted to move to an integrated neighborhood if he cannot afford to do so because he is unemployed or has a low-paying job with no future? . . . Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants or accommodated in integrated hotels if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even to take his wife out to dine?[16]

The crux of King's liberation message against racial and economic exploitation is this:

> Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system in such a manner that they can afford to exercise that right.[17]

Despite his disappointment with America's racism in economics, he was against violent means to redress it, for his goal is community.

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[16] King, Why We Can't Wait, 135-136.

[17] Ibid., 136.

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Liberation and the Beloved Community--King's Vision

The concept of the Beloved Community has been one of the central thoughts of King's thinking. His spirit was fired by the vision of creating a new community--a beloved community. This theme permeated his thinking from the beginning of his ministry to the end of his work. In one of his first publications, King stated the purpose of the Montgomery bus boycott in the spirit of community: "But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community."[18] The same note was struck in one of the last books he wrote, "Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation. . . ."[19] By these statements, King envisioned a society in which love and justice would be practiced without any reference to race and color.

As King's civil rights thrust took on regional and national significance, the meaning of his beloved community unfolded. For King, desegregation was only a short range goal. According to him, "Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community."[20] In King's mind, the beloved community was not desegregation; rather, it was the

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[18] King, "Facing the Challenge," 30

[19] King, Trumpet of Conscience, 68.

[20] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Analysis of the Ethical Demands of Integration," Address, 27 Dec. 1962, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 3.

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first step to genuine community. King then stated what a desegregated society is:

> It leads to "physical proximity without spiritual affinity." It gives us a society where men are physically desegregated and are spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts are apart. It gives us special togetherness and spiritual apartness. It leaves us with a stagnant quality of sameness rather than constructive equality of oneness.[21]

The need then is integration, "The positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities. Integration then is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing."[22] This spirit will enlarge "the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness."[23] In the spirit of interrelatedness, King saw an outline of the beloved community in our present dependence on one another. He expressed it this way, "Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally 'in the need.' We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women."[24]

We can gain important insights of King's interpretation of the beloved community when it is recognized that King saw the civil rights movement as a microcosm of the beloved community. His civil rights group was a motley crowd of doctors, lawyers, clergy, domestics, and day

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[21] Ibid., 4.

[22] Ibid., 3.

[23] King, Why We Can't Wait, 152.

[24] King, Where Do We Go, 181.

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laborers. Thus King, reflecting on the civil rights workers assembled after the March to Montgomery in 1966, said:

> As I stood with them and saw White and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizations, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shopworkers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood.[25]

In King's beloved community emphasis is placed on economic conditions. For King, each one is affected by the economic condition of the other, "The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich, the betterment of the poor enriches the rich."[26] In more concrete language, he spoke clearly of justice for the poor participants in the beloved community in this dramatic statement:

> Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brother of the Third World--Asia, Africa, and Latin America--no longer will be the victim of imperialist exploitation but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy, and disease.[27]

Smith and Zepp said that King's "vision of the 'Beloved Community' was the organizing principle of all

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[25] Ibid., 9.

[26] Ibid., 181.

[27] King, "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," 110-111.

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King's thought and activity."[28] Yet they say little or nothing about King's blackness as a motivating factor in the search for or possible role of Black people in the new community. On the contrary, King said much on the role of Blacks and the beloved community. He hinted that his blackness, like Howard Thurman's, contributed to this search for community.

To aid the realization of the beloved community, King summoned Blacks to work on two fronts:

> On the one hand, we must continue to resist the system of segregation which is the basic cause of our lagging standards; on the other hand we must work constructively to improve the standards themselves.[29]

With regards to resisting segregation in anticipation of community, King spoke against a deadening apathy among Blacks which prevents their registering to vote and also their refusing to exercise their voting privileges. He describes this as "a form of moral and political suicide."[30] According to King, Blacks resisting segregation in all its forms is the only way to gain the respect of whites in preparation for total community.[31]

Making needed criticism of his people, King pointed to areas in which Black standards can be improved: (1) the

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[28] Smith and Zepp, 119.

[29] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 224.

[30] Ibid., 222.

[31] Ibid., 212.

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crime rate among Blacks was too high, (2) the middle class live above their means, (3) "we spend far too much on drink," (4) there was too much boisterousness, and (5) there needs to be better sanitation and higher morals.[32]

King earnestly believed the beloved community could be realized in American society. He felt that nonviolence was the only means of accomplishing this goal. He described this method as "a way as old as the insight of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the methods of Mahatma Gandhi."[33] This was the method he embraced for life and the new community. Consequently, Blacks were challenged to work passionately and unrelentingly for first class citizenship but never with second class methods of violence. In King's thinking, "Nonviolence is vital because it is the only way to reestablish the broken community."[34]

Therefore, King often warned his followers against using the self-defeating methods of the Black supremacists. He argued, "Black supremacy is as bad as white supremacy."[35] His stance was based on Christian love; hence, some of the reasons for the use of nonviolence in the search for community were: (1) the liberation movement was

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[32] Ibid., 223.

[33] King, "The Rising Tide," 5.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Address to the National Bar Association," Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 20 Aug. 1959, King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 8.

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based on redemptive love centered in Christ's cross that went all the way to restore broken community,[36] and (2) the movement's aim was not to defeat the white man but to win his friendship and understanding.[37] Thus, in King's writings, there are redemptive strands for the liberation of the white man because he too is an integral part of the beloved community. King put it this way:

> If our white brothers are to master fear, they must depend not only on their commitment to Christian love, but also on the Christlike love which the Negro generates toward them.[38]

In another of his works, King said, "Since the white man's personality is distorted by segregation, he needs the love of the Negro to remove his tensions and insecurities."[39]

A third reason for the use of nonviolence is that God is not only interested in the freedom of Black men and brown and yellow men, "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race" for the beloved community.[40]

King's beloved community was not otherworldy and racist. It was very much this-worldly and sought participants from all races. In fact, Martin Luther King's dream of a beloved community was based on the wider American

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[36] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 105.

[37] King, "The Rising Tide," 5.

[38] King, Strength to Love, 113.

[39] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 95.

[40] King, "An Address to the National Bar Association," 9.

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"dream, of a land of the free and the home of the brave." This dream, like the American dream, was woven with the threads of religious hope and American democratic traditions. As early as 1960, King expressed his dream for community in the language of the American dream. Here is King's statement:

> A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take the necessities from the many to give to the luxuries of the few; a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare live together as brothers--that is the dream. Whenever it is fulfilled we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glowing daybreak of freedom and justice for all of God's children.[41]

He readily agreed that his vision of the beloved community was "deeply rooted in the American dream."[42] These familiar notes of King's dream, played all over America in sermons and speeches, were raised to a grand crescendo in his March on Washington Speech. Like the elements of the beloved community, the Washington dream called for racial equality, economic opportunities, brotherhood, freedom from wants, and freedom and democracy for all. In this atmosphere, God's children of all colors, races, and

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[41] King, "The Rising Tide," 6.

[42] Smith and Zepp, 127.

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religions will thank God almighty.[43]

Some analysts of King's thoughts have shortsightedly attributed King's whole vision of the beloved community to his white mentors of academia. In this connection, Smith and Zepp agreed that King's dream was based on his "conception of a biblical God who had inspired the prophetic teachings of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah about justice, mercy and peace."[44] Yet these authors attribute the strands of the "Kingdom of God and millennial hope" motifs in King's beloved community to Reinhold Niebuhr, Edgar S. Brightman, and Walter Rauschenbusch.[45] But hope for and work to want a new community free from racism has been the goal of Blacks, and this hope was based on the Bible. Born and raised in the Black Baptist tradition where his preacher parent(s) drilled in him the teachings of the Bible, King must have thought of the beloved community without the aid of his white mentors from Crozer and Boston.

Lewis Baldwin rightly pointed out that the concept of the beloved community King expounded was not the preserve of white academia. The slaves dreamed and struggled for "a community where freedom and justice guaranteed by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence would prevail." King's idea of freedom and justice was rooted

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[43] King, "March on Washington," 1-5.

[44] Smith and Zepp, 126.

[45] Ibid., 128-139.

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in the faith of his slave forebears. It was their hope and dream that King translated into his vision of the beloved community with its challenge of freedom and justice for the downtrodden.[46] In this connection, Baldwin observes:

> In a manner similar to his slave ancestors, King drew the experiences of Moses and the Israelites in Egyptian captivity as evidence that God ultimately triumphs over evil and oppression to liberate his people. When he proclaimed that "although the arch of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice," and when he sang "We shall overcome," King was anticipating in a Christian optimism concerning the future of humankind and human society which the slaves gave expression in their spiritual songs.[47]

The attitude of the slaves to their masters in times of sickness, and their spirit of forgiveness toward their oppressors, is another evidence that King's concept of community came from the tradition of his enslaved forebears. The slaves believed that all of God's people were related to each other. Thus, they practiced this in their religion and looked forward to brotherhood and unity among even their tormentors. Baldwin insightfully points to the slaves' hope for community expressed in their songs. He states:

> Convinced that "God's gonna bring together the nations," The slaves gave voice to their sense of community in spirituals like:

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[46] Lewis Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr., The Black Church and the Black Messianic Vision," Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center 12, nos. 1-2 (Fall 1984/ Spring 1985): 100.

[47] Ibid., 100-101.

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Let us break bread together
On our knees
As we face the rising sun

and

Walk together children
Don't you get weary
There's a great camp meeting
In the Promised Land.[48]

Baldwin concludes that it was this vision of the beloved community that King gave eloquent utterance in his "I have a Dream" address:

> And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles. Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing the words of the old Negro Spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last. Thank God almighty we are Free at last."[49]

Liberation and Reconciliation

Bound Together

King's vision of community will not brook a division between liberation and reconciliation. These elements in King are bound together. Truly, today liberation theology is relevant in the American society and takes on urgent relevance as South Africa's apartheid deepens. With the emergence of Black Power in the mid-1960s and the consequent white backlash, reconciliation between Blacks and whites has receded to the background. However, with King's

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[48] Ibid., 102-103.

[49] Cited by Baldwin in Flip Shulke, ed., Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary . . . Montgomery to Memphis (New York: Norton, 1976), 218.

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vision of community, he held liberation and reconciliation together. Some of the more articulate Black theologians, while they do not rule out reconciliation in their Black liberation thrust, have ignored this much needed Christian element of life. James Cone, the foremost Black theologian in America, has been quiet on this subject. J. Deotis Roberts, a Black theologian, has shown sensitivity for the subject in writing a book, Liberation and Reconciliation. Early in this volume, Roberts says, "It is my view that liberation and reconciliation must be considered at the same time and in relation to each other."[50] Again, Robert writes, "Liberation and reconciliation are two main poles of black theology. They are not antithetical--one moves naturally from one to the other in the light of Christian understanding of God and man."[51]

But, for Roberts, reconciliation must be based on equality. In his own way, he expresses this: "Black-white reconciliation, on Christian terms cannot be based upon the superordination-subordination pattern of whites over blacks."[52] This posture is logically reasonable. But Roberts calls for a liberation before reconciliation as his book title, Liberation and Reconciliation, suggests. Thus, for Roberts, "Liberation is a proper precondition for

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[50] J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 3.

[51] Ibid., 26.

[52] Ibid., 10.

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reconciliation in the area of racial relations."[53] Roberts sees the American Black-white situation where "whites cannot repent and blacks cannot forgive" and offers "the agency of divine grace and power" as the solution.[54]

Although Roberts, like Martin Luther King, brings liberation and reconciliation together, he differs from King in insisting that liberation should come before reconciliation. From the beginning of King's liberation thrust in the Montgomery bus boycott, he called for liberation and reconciliation simultaneously. His address to his people, gathered December 5, 1955, to map strategies for a bus boycott in Montgomery, bears out this posture. Note his words, holding both elements together at the same time, "And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. . . ." After a stance of "fight," King reminded his hearers:

> In all our doings. In all our deliberations here this evening and all of the week and while, whatever we do, we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action. . . . Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith.[55]

King, reporting on his stance at this preparation meeting, spoke of his having a balance between liberation and love:

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[53] Ibid., 52.

[54] Ibid., 118.

[55] King, Address, Holt Street Baptist Church, 2-4.

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> I decided that I had to face the challenge head on, and attempt to combine two apparent irreconcilables. I would seek to arouse the group to action by insisting that their self-respect was at stake and if they accepted such injustices without protesting, they would betray their own sense of dignity and the eternal edicts of God Himself. But I would balance this with a strong affirmation of the Christian doctrine of love.[56]

In the mid and late 1960s, King was heavily criticized for his nonviolence in the struggle for racial justice. However, King held to his position, for he saw in this method both liberation and conciliatory elements. In this connection, he answered John Killens who insisted on a liberation before integration:

> The phenomena of integration and liberation cannot be as neatly divided as Killens would have it. . . . In our kind of society liberation cannot come without integration and integration cannot come without liberation.[57]

King did not believe in violent methods in his liberation movement, for his goal was not freedom per se but community. That was why he chose the method of nonviolence. For, after the battle is over, Blacks and whites together will have to live in the same "world house."[58]

Therefore, Martin Luther King's ministry was a demonstration of liberation and reconciliation bound together. He worked for the liberation of his Black people, yet he used a method that would also liberate white opponents

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[56] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 60.

[57] Ibid., 61-62.

[58] Ibid., 167.

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from racism. From the beginning of his career, he advocated fighting racism in the spirit of Christian love. In his last book, Where Do We Go From Here, King called for a declaration of war on "poverty, racism and militarism." Yet this call was in the context of "a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race and nation," based on love--agape love.[59]

Liberation and Nonconformity

King was an avowed integrationist, advocating militancy in love's spirit of moderation. His message was liberating enough to attack the citadel of racism that scars the white man's soul. Yet the message was healing enough to call simultaneously for the loving of the segregator while resisting segregation. Although a died-in-the-wool integrationist at the bottom, King was also a nonconformist. From his early youth, he was unwilling to conform to all the tenets of the Black Baptist fundamentalist faith. At Crozer Seminary, King stated that an uncritical attitude was "contrary to the very nature of my being." King, reflecting on his early youth, said that "at the age of 13 I shocked my Sunday School class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus."[60]

This spirit of nonconformity was to characterize his

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[59] Ibid., 190.

[60] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development," n.d.. King papers, Boston Univ. Library, 10. [Essay written at Crozer Seminary while a student.]

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ministry and civil rights movement. As he put it, he must be maladjusted in a racist society. He stated it thus:

> I never intended to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intended to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob rule. I never intended to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. . . . The salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.[61]

Congregations sometimes influence the pulpit by hints, persuasions, and outright pressure tactics. But this was not to be with King's pulpit. He felt that preachers should not conform to what their congregations like to hear. For him, the prophetic message of the pulpit was not to be obstructed. In a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, King said he was anointed by God to preach; hence, his guidelines came from God not man. Consequently, it is God who would determine the nature of his message. He expressed it this way:

> The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones and when God gets upon me I've got to say it, I got to tell it all over everywhere. And God has called me to deliver those that are in captivity. Some are suffering. Some people are hungry this morning. Some people are still living with segregation and discrimination this morning. I am going to preach about it. I am going to fight for them. I'll die for them if necessary because I got my guidelines clear and the God that I serve and the God that called me to preach told me that every now and then I'll have to go to jail, every now and then I'll have to agonize and suffer for the freedom of his children. I even may have to die for it. But

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[61] King, "The Desirability of Being Maladjusted," 17-18.

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> if that's necessary I'd rather follow the guidelines of God than to follow the guidelines of man.[62]

In the statement above, we hear the agony and loneliness of a prophet's heart which chose death rather than conforming to the status quo. King's stance is reminiscent of a Jeremiah of the Old Testament who suffered from bearing a God-given, unpopular message to prophesy against the head of state. But, out of an anguished heart, he prophesied for, like King, he was following the guidelines of God rather than men.

For King, the transformed nonconformist bears the pain of the cross in the constant separation from one's family, the bombing of one's home, and the threat of death. We hear his anguished heart in these words:

> If you are going to be a transformed nonconformist, there will be days when you will not know what would happen next. Morning after morning, you will get up and look into the faces of your children and wife, not knowing whether you will get back to them because you know that you are living every day under the threat of death, . . . you will have your little seven or eight year old child saying, Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much. If you are going to be a transformed nonconformist, sometimes you may be stabbed. . . . People are to lie on you, spread false rumors on you, write bad and ugly editorials about you.[63]

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[62] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Guidelines for a Constructive Church," Sermon, n.d., King papers, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 5.

[63] King, Sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, 16 Jan. 1966, 12.

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Yet King was not a self-righteous martyr who saw salvation in his righteous cause. For he insisted that "nonconformity in and of itself is not life's greatest virtue. Nonconformity per se contains no saving values."[64] The pain, loneliness, danger, and agony of his stance was not virtue per se, but rather, according to King, "This is the meaning of the cross. This is its power. . . ."[65]

This cross bearing, nonconformity, and loneliness took King to the ghettos of the Northern cities. There he identified with poor Blacks with the commitment to liberate these different types of Blacks from those of the South. Their hopes were dashed. For "integrated bathrooms and restaurants were totally irrelevant to the lives of Blacks in the gateless poverty of the Northern ghetto."[66] But, in Chicago, he came face to face with the opposition of Blacks whom he wanted to help. King later wrote of his conversation with these Blacks who felt the only solution to problems of ghetto dwellers was violence:

> Over cups of coffee in my apartment in Chicago, I have often talked late at night and over into the small hours of the morning with proponents of Black Power who argued passionately about the vitality of violence and riots. They don't quote Gandhi or Tolstoy. Their Bible is Frantz Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth." This black

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[64] Ibid., 10.

[65] Ibid., 12.

[66] Louis Lomax, "When Nonviolence Meets Black Power," Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), 165.

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> psychiatrist from Martineque, who went to Algeria to work with the National Liberation Front in its fight against the French, argues . . . that violence is a psychologically healthy and tactfully sound method for the oppressed. And so, realizing that they are a part of that vast company of the "wretched of the earth," these young American Negroes, who are predominantly involved in the Black Power movement, often quote Fanton's belief that violence is the only thing that will bring about liberation. As they say, "Sing us no songs on nonviolence, sing us no songs of progress, for nonviolence and progress belong to middle-class Negroes and Whites and we are not interested in you."[67]

King's problems were compounded in Chicago when Black Power advocates chose his Chicago campaign to openly attack their father-mentor. King reported how they booed him:

> Unfortunately, when hope is diminished, the hate is turned most bitterly toward those who originally build up the hope. In all the speaking that I have done in the United States before varied audiences, including some hostile whites, the only time that I have been booed was one night in a Chicago mass meeting by some young members of the Black Power movement. . . . I thought of my suffering and sacrifices over the last twelve years. Why would they boo one so close to them.[68]

With regard to King's enduring and relating this incident, one can "feel the tears in Martin's soul. It was as if one's only begotten scn had plunged the dagger in his father's back."[69]

King was not only rejected by Black Power advocates--ones so close to him--but also by whites. The latter

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[67] Ibid., 168-169.

[68] Ibid., 169.

[69] Ibid.

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poured money in his civil rights movement and influenced the liberal press in support of King's movement. The Black Power advocates felt that if violence was what it takes to liberate America from racism, then violence should be used in civil rights. Liberal whites and many influential middle-class Blacks opposed King for his stance on the Vietnam war. In short, King was opposed on all sides in the mid-1960s. He was sandwiched between the pressures of liberal whites and Black Power militants.

However, lonely and weary from criticism from all angles, King, the nonconformist with head unbowed, took a position on Vietnam similar to that of the early Christians on war in the Roman Empire. Taking his cue from the early Christians, King reiterated his position against the war in Vietnam, August 1967, in a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church:

> And I've decided what I'm going to do, I ain't going to kill nobody in Mississippi and I don't plan to kill anybody in Vietnam, and ain't going to study war no more. . . . I don't care who doesn't like what I say about it. I don't care who criticizes me. I'm going to stick with the best. . . . And there comes a time when a true follower of Jesus Christ must take a stand that is neither safe nor politic nor popular but he must take that stand because it is right. Every now and then we sing about it--if you are right, God will fight your battle. I am going to stick by the best during these evil times.[70]

To differ so vehemently with your political backers,

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[70] King, "Standing by the Best," 7.

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with insiders from your movement and your national government was a lonely and painful road for one to travel. King took this road not because he wanted so much to be different but because undergirding his Vietnam stance was his Christian philosophy. He put it this way:

> Every man is somebody because he is a child of God. And so when we say, "Thou shalt not kill," we are really saying that human life is too sacred to be taken on the battlefields of the world. . . . Man is a child of God, made in his image and therefore must be respected as such. Until man sees this everywhere, until nations see this everywhere, we will be fighting wars; one day somebody should remind us that even though there may be political and ideological differences between us, the Vietnamese are our brothers, the Russians are our brothers, the Chinese are our brothers; and one day we have got to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . In Christ there is neither Communist nor Capitalist.[71]

For a public figure with the stature of King, in the midst of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war, to say the Russians, Chinese, and Vietnamese are America's brothers, the United States should not be at war with them, is to be seen as a traitor. Such was the lonely road that Martin Luther King trod. He was being faithful to the cross. But it could be rightly said that he was different from other cross bearers in America, even his white mentors of Crozer and Boston. The reason was that King was a Black liberation theologian doing his theology in the midst of a sweltering people struggling to be free.

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[71] King, "A Christmas Sermon," 3.

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King's Liberation Message: A Precursor of Black Theology

Emergence of Black Theology

From King's social and religious thrust in American society emerged a stance that was Christian and radical. This school of thought, although Christian, was a meaningful strand in Black Power themes. This socio-religious thinking has come to be known as Black Theology. In the summer of 1966, the term "Black Power" began to replace the term "integration" among Black civil rights activists. When James Meredith was shot and wounded in his 1966 march through Mississippi, civil rights leaders under the leadership of King, McKissick, and Stokely Carmichael formed a coalition to continue Meredith's "march against fear." McKissick and Carmichael objected to the presence of white sympathizers who wanted to join the march. King insisted on an integrated march. A compromise was struck and the march continued. The group marched into Greenwood, Mississippi, where Carmichael was jailed. Upon his release, Carmichael mounted the platform before a large gathering and issued the famous call for "Black Power." This was to reverberate all over the United States.[72]

The rise of the Black Power movement had a tremendous impact on Black Theology. When Carmichael and other radical Blacks broke away from King's commitment to

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[72] Lomax, "When Nonviolence Meets Black Power," 164.

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nonviolence and began proclaiming Black Power, white Christians were shocked and called upon the Black clergy to denounce Black Power as unchristian. To the surprise of white Christians, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (later the word Negro was replaced with Black) refused their advice and instead wrote a "Black Power Statement." This "Statement" was a watershed in Black and white theological posture in United States mainline churches. On the significance of this Black Power statement, Cone writes:

> The publication of the "Black Power Statement" may be regarded as the beginning of the conscious development of black theology in which black ministers separated their understanding of the gospel of Jesus from white Christianity and identified it with the struggles of the black poor for justice. This theological initiative was unprecedented in the history of mainline black churches or among black and white churches. Although black Christians always contended that the racist behavior of white churches was unchristian, they also assumed that the theology of whites was essentially correct. The Black Power Statement represents the beginning of a radical theological movement toward the development of an independent black perspective on the Christian faith. . . . Black leadership believed that the time had come for black Christians to make their own interpretation of the gospel by separating black religion from white religion, and then connecting the former with the African heritage and their contemporary fight for justice.[73]

The Statement was first published in the New York Times, July 31, 1966. The following is an excerpt from the Black Power Statement.

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[73] James H. Cone, For My People (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), 10-11.

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> The fundamental distortion facing us in the controversy about black power is rooted in a gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negroes and White Americans. It is this distortion, mainly, which is responsible for the widespread, though often inarticulate, assumption that white people are justified in getting what they want through the use of power, but that Negro Americans must, either by nature or by circumstance, make their appeal only through conscience. As a result the power of white men and the conscience of black men have both been corrupted. The power of white men is corrupted because it meets little meaningful resistance from Negroes to temper it and keep white men from aping God. The conscience of black men is corrupted because, having no power to implement the demands of conscience, the concern for justice is transmuted into a distorted form of love, which in the absence of justice becomes chaotic self-surrender. Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars. We are faced now with a situation where conscienceless power meets powerless conscience, threatening the very foundation of our nation.[74]

Between 1966 and 1969 there was a rapid movement from integration to Black separatism--from King's ideas of the beloved community toward Malcolm X's nationalist philosophy. The decisive turning point toward Black separatist sentiment came at the National Council of Churches Conference on "The Church and Urban Crisis." The younger Black members of the National Conference of Black Churchmen insisted in separating themselves from whites, did so, and issued a statement identifying themselves with the Black poor and their liberating heritage. They simply said:

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[74] Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), 23-24.

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> We have come to realize that Black Power is an expression of the need for Black Authenticity in a white dominated society, a society which has from its earliest beginnings displayed unadulterated racism. We affirm without fear of repudiation the meaningfulness of blackness and our identity as Black churchmen. . . . We call upon the white churches . . . to recognize that in spite of the many commendable contributions to the struggle of social justice, we have come to a point where the very structures, forms and priorities are being seriously questioned, particularly by the Black Power Revolution. Racial Justice can no longer be considered just another cause pursued by a few while the rest of the church does business as usual. Moreover, it cannot simply be a cause alongside other causes--to be used as a ploy to justify the existence of the Church--but must become the number one priority as it is the number one problem of the nation.[75]

By 1969, the NCBC had convened other important meetings in Atlanta, Dallas, and St. Louis. In these meetings, Black church leaders sought to foster the Black liberation struggle and to create a Black Theology.[76] It was from these meetings that the term Black Theology originated. The NCBC meetings, along with the promotion of theological dialogues and study papers, provided the impetus for scholars such as Cone, Wilmore, and J. Deotis Roberts to write books on Black Theology. The first major work on Black Theology was authored by James Cone and published in 1979, Black Theology and Black Power.[77]

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75 Ibid., 44-45.

76 Cone, For My People, 17-23.

77 Ibid., 23.

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Black Theology and Black Power

Definition of Black

Liberation Theology

The term "theology" in Western thought conjures a picture of a closely-reasoned, intellectual argument. But Black Theology is of a different mold. Black religion and theology came rather out of the crucible of Black experience. Of this, Wilmore explains:

> Both Black religion and theological reflection are characteristically biographical and experimental. This is perhaps one of the features which sets them apart from the mainline White Church. Black people have done theology out of their guts, out of individual and collective experiences of struggle. The message of the Bible did not come to us in monasteries, in theological libraries, or in debates with philosophers and kings, but in hush-harbor meetings out of earshot of the patrollers, under the lash of plantation overseers, and in the dilapidated impoverished ghettos of a hundred cities that continue to be concentration camps for an exploited racial group.[78]

Therefore, Black Theology of Liberation must be measured by its own yardstick and not by a traditional white measurement. For theologians write theologies from their own perspectives and to select audiences. Thus, in July 13, 1969, Black theologians, through the Statement by the National Committee of Black Churchmen, were speaking to the contemporary mood of Black people. The Statement produced by the Committee on Theological Prospectus defines Black Theology:

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[78] Wilmore and Cone, 3.

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> Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression.

The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the Gospel. Jesus is the liberation.[79]

We catch the mood and determination of the NCBC in its concluding words reminiscent of the spirit of Eldridge Cleaver. This is the message of Black Theology. In the words of Cleaver, "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our efforts to gain it."[80]

Cone concurs with the NCBC statement in his stance on Black Theology. He affirms Black dignity against a destroying white racism. He expresses it thus:

> Black Theology is primarily a theology of and for black people who share the common belief that racism will be destroyed only when black people decide to say in word and deed to white racists: "We ain't gonna stand anymore of this."[81]

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[79] Ibid., 101.

[80] Ibid., 102.

[81] Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 117.

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In his book, A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone speaks of a Black Theology grounded in Jesus Christ:

> The norm of Black Theology must take seriously two realities, actually two aspects of a single reality: the liberation of black people and the revelation of Jesus Christ. With these two realities before us what then is the norm of Black Theology? The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk in the manifestation of Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation. This is the hermeneutical principle for Black Theology which guides its interpretation of the meaning of contemporary Christianity.[82]

Cone invests Black Theology with a keen sense of mission to liberate oppressed Blacks. Black Theology's task is well defined by Cone:

> The task of Black Theology then is to analyze the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in black people to destroy white racism.[83]

The Black community must expect Black Theology to liberate it from white racism and oppression. According to Cone, "If Black Theology fails to do this adequately, then the black community will and should destroy it."[84]

Wilmore differs slightly from Cone in his view of Black Theology, although they belong to the same school of

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[82] James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 79-80.

[83] Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 117.

[84] Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 76-77.

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theological thought. Wilmore's insights as a church historian are brought to bear on his definition of Black Theology. According to him, "It is an elucidation of what we have understood God to be about in our history, particularly in our struggle against racist oppression."[85]

Cone benefited from the criticism by some of his colleagues in Black Theology that his presentation of Black Theology was too dependent on the white academic model. Thus, by 1975 when he wrote God of the Oppressed, Cone began to see Black Theology in terms of "telling the story" --Black people's story. Here is his definition of Black Theology in 1975:

> Black Theology is a theology of and for Black people, an examination of their stories, tales and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of "how we got over". . . . Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of black experience because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of black experience itself.[86]

These posturings on the Black Theology of Liberation seem to put distance between their authors and Martin Luther King in his quest for a Beloved Community in America. But a close examination of King will clearly show that the Black Theology theologians of the 1970s and today belong to the same school as King.

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[85] Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Introduction," Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979, 4.

[86] Cone, God of the Oppressed, 18.

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Black Theology's Indebtedness to King

Among the chief Black Theology theologians which this paper cites are Joseph Washington, James Cone, and J. Deotis Roberts. J. Deotis Roberts largely falls in the camp of King's view of community and love with his view of liberation and reconciliation.[87] Although Washington was critical of King as a theologian, he is basically an integrationist in his thinking. James Cone is the most radical and perhaps the foremost exponent of Black Theology in North America today. Because his method of teaching liberation "by any means" seems to be in contradiction to King's nonviolence, his assessment of and comparison with King is examined.

Cone has increasingly acknowledged Black Theology's debt to Martin Luther King's activities and thoughts. Cone rightfully observed that Black radicals have failed to win enthusiastic support in the Black community because they have failed to take seriously the religious character inherent in the Black community. Thinking of King's great success in centering liberation of Blacks in Jesus Christ, Cone said:

> As a prophet, with a charisma never before witnessed in this century, King preached black liberation in the light of Jesus Christ and thus aroused the spirit of freedom among black people. To be sure, one may argue that his

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[87] Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 128-154.

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> method of nonviolence did not meet the needs of the black community in an age of Black Power; but it is beyond question that it was King's influence and leadership in the black community which brought us to the period in which we now live. And for that we are in his debt. His life and message demonstrate that the "soul" of the black community is inseparable from liberation but always grounded in Jesus Christ. The task of Black Theology is to build on the foundation laid by King by recognizing the theological character of the black community, a community whose being is inseparable from liberation through Jesus Christ.[88]

This assessment of King acknowledges the religious or Christian nature of Blacks, and Cone recognizes that King's success was due to the massive support he received from the Black community. The statement stops short of saying, also, that Black people's faith in their liberation from oppression is more akin to King's method, faith, and life-style than more radical Blacks. This is why it is such an awesome task for Black Theology to build on the foundation laid by King.

In God of the Oppressed, King is put in the noble company of Richard Allen and Henry Highland Garnet who "identified obedience to God with the struggle against slavery." Cone reflected, "To justify his fight against injustice, Martin Luther King, Jr. referred not only to the Exodus and Jesus Christ, but especially to the prophets of the Old Testament." He quoted Amos often, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing

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[88] Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 77-78.

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stream" (Amos 5:24 RSV).[89]

As Cone leans toward the Black liberation preachers of the antebellum era and the Negro Spirituals as the context for doing his theology, he becomes more and more appreciative of King. Writing in Theology Today, April 1986, Cone speaks of King's impact on American religion in general and black religious thought in particular. He observes:

> No thinker has made a greater impact upon black religious thought or even upon American society and religion as a whole than Martin Luther King, Jr. The fact that many white theologians can write about American religion and theology with no reference to him reveals both the presence of racism in the academy and the tendency to limit theology narrowly to academic discourse of seminary and university professors.[90]

Cone is critical of the white church's creation of a white Jesus which it uses to prostitute King's theme of love and nonviolence. He felt that this system praises the false image of King, yet King was an enemy to white racism. Of this situation, Cone writes:

> He tells black people that love means turning the other cheek; that the only way to win your political freedom is through nonviolence; he even praises Martin Luther King, Jr., for his devotion to him, though he knows that King was always his enemy in spirit and that he chose King because he thought King was the least of the evils available.[91]

In a similar vein, Cone points out the inconsistency and ambivalence of white American churches and leaders

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[89] Cone, God of the Oppressed, 153-154.

[90] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 11.

[91] Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 79.

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toward King. In the early years of his civil rights and liberation movement, whites were silently cool toward his message and activities. After his death, white's interpretation of King took out the sting and punch from his message and, consequently, praised a pale copy of Martin Luther King. Cone recalls:

> When King and other black church persons began to relate the Christian gospel to the struggle for racial justice in American society, the great majority of white churches and their theologians denied that such a relationship existed. Conservative white Christians claimed that religion and politics did not mix. Liberal white Christians, with few exceptions during the 1950s and early 60s, remained silent on the theme or they advocated a form of gradualism and denounced boycotts, sit-ins, and freedom rides.[92]

However, Cone and other exponents of Black Theology have unequivocally expressed their differences with King. Cone thinks that American whites have practiced and embraced violence "in the violent extermination of red people and the violent enslavement of Black people." He speaks of a "law and order" democracy as "the violence of Christian murderers and patriot citizens who define right in terms of whiteness and wrong as blackness." He contends that violence is initiated and perpetuated by the oppressor race. Therefore, it is the oppressed who must decide what means they must use to liberate themselves, not the oppressors.[93] In this connection, Cone says:

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[92] Cone, For My People, 7.

[93] Cone, God of the Oppressed, 217-219.

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> It is obvious that I do not share Martin Luther King, Jr.'s explication of this issue. . . . His dependence on the analysis of love found in liberal theology and his confidence that the universe is on the side of justice seem not to take seriously white violence in America. I disagreed with his conceptual analysis of violence versus nonviolence, because his distinctions between these terms did not appear to face head-on the historical and sociological complexities of human existence in a racist society.[94]

Again, in a 1984 Theology Today article, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology--Black Church," Cone expresses another disagreement with King. He says:

> I do not believe whites or any group holding power will voluntarily empower those who are powerless. Freedom is not a gift but must be taken. While the Gospel of God can and does empower people to change sides in the struggle for freedom, we must realize that many people publicly testify that they are for the poor but are in fact against them.[95]

Roberts, too, disagreed with King on two points. Speaking of King's concept of love, Roberts says:

> It is my understanding that he leaned too far, at first, toward love as an ethical norm. He accepted Aulene's interpretation of agape uncritically. Therefore, his understanding of love was not always as robust as it might have been.

Again, he criticized King's dream that it "was for a promised land of integration--one in which blacks would be admitted to white society with everything to receive, with little if anything to give."[96]

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[94] Ibid., 221.

[95] Cone, "Black Theology--Black Church," 416.

[96] Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, 182-183.

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Despite the difference in semantics among Black Theology theologians and King, they share the idea that hope is created in the context of despair and oppression. Cone says that this "is what made my theology similar to King's."[97] Cone sums up the difference between himself and King this way:

> Even though there are important differences between King and me, I think that they can best be understood from within the context of the black church rather than the context of white liberal and neo-orthodox theologies of North America and Europe. Such views that are represented by King and me, as well as others, can be found throughout the black religious tradition. There is no need to turn to White Western Theology for an explanation. King's perspective has its antecedence in Frederick Douglas, while my view is partly found in the life and writings of Highland Garnet, both of whom were contemporaries in the nineteenth century and stressed somewhat different views regarding the place of whites in the black struggle for freedom.[98]

Black Theology advocates have come out of the same background--the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is not unusual that they have certain common goals, although there are obvious conceptual differences among them.

Chief Characteristics of Black Theology--King's Message

Certain characteristics run through the writings of

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[97] Cone, God of the Oppressed, 222.

[98] Cone, "Black Theology--Black Church," 416-417.

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Black Theology theologians. Joseph R. Washington has enumerated several contrasts between Black Theology and white theology. These contrasts largely represent the salient characteristics of Black Theology. "Black Theology," Washington argues, "contrasts with white theology in that it is first and foremost community rather than individually oriented.[99] The thrust of King's life and message was the quest of community in America for all races. From Montgomery to Memphis, his preaching was marked with an emphasis on community not based on race or economic conditions. His speech honoring Du Bois is a case in point:

> Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of the dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World--Asia, Africa and Latin America--will no longer be the victims of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease.[100]

His sermons and speeches are replete with the spirit of community. For King, "He who works against community is working against the whole creation."[101]

According to Washington, "Black Theology differs from white theology in that it is concerned to live life fully

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[99] Joseph R. Washington, Jr., "The Roots and Fruits of Black Theology," Theology Today 30 (July 1973): 128.

[100] King, "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," 110.

[101] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 106.

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here without fear of reward or punishment in the next world."[102] Emphasis on this world obviously means practical interest in this life against undue emphasis on the world beyond. King has always stressed the need for a this-worldly religion rather than the pie-in-the-sky religion. King disagrees with a religion that neglects the now for a hereafter. In this connection, he declared:

> Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.[103]

Thus, King's sermons, while not ruling out a world beyond, lean heavily toward the here and now. Washington writes:

> Black Theology veers away from white theology in that one seeks in and through community not salvation for the next world but power for this world. Black Theology is power seeking for community rather than materialistic and spiritualistic gain for self-centeredness.[104]

The beginning of King's career marked his quest for power for the citizens of Montgomery through the famous Montgomery bus boycott of December 1955. In his book, Where Do We Go From Here, King alludes to the need for power in the Black community for the uplift of the race. He felt moral persuasion was not enough but political

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[102] Washington, "The Roots and Fruits," 128.

[103] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 91.

[104] Washington, "The Roots and Fruits," 128.

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constructive power was desirable. He stated clearly the need for Blacks to acquire power:

> Equally fallacious is the notion that ethical appeals and persuasion alone will bring about justice. This does not mean that ethical appeals must not be made. It simply means that those appeals must be undergirded by some form of constructive cohesive power.[105]

Boycotts and civil disobedience resulted in power for the Black community. King's belief in this philosophy is seen in his observation:

> Nothing was done until we acted on these very issues and demonstrated before the court of world public opinion the urgent need of change. It was the same story in the voting rights. The Civil Rights Commission, three years before Selma, had recommended the changes we started marching for, but nothing was done until, in 1965, we created a crisis the nation couldn't ignore. The same kind of dramatic crisis was created in Selma two years later. The results on the national scene were the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Act, as the President and Congress responded to the drama and the creative tension generated by the carefully planned demonstrations.[106]

This was power in this world, here and now, for community. Another of Washington's contrasts states:

> Black Theology breaks from white theology in the affirmation that what is good for black people is good for all people to work for the best interest of black people is to work for the best interest of all people.[107]

King's messages, although not emphasizing blackness per se and setting Blacks as paradigm for dealing with

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[105] King, Where Do We Go, 152.

[106] King, "Let Justice Roll Down," 374.

[107] Washington, "The Roots and Fruits," 128.

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other people, were inclusive of all people. His sermons have elements of universality. His oft-repeated statement of our mutual dependence on one another is relevant:

> We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.[108]

Last, Washington says, "Mainstream black theology is distinguished from mainstream white theology in its emphasis upon the centrality of feeling, emotional religion.[109] Apparently, Washington has made a full circle, for in 1964 he derided emotion in religion and said of King, "Negro Baptist preachers like King are expected to generate more heat than light."[110]

King had a healthy view of emotion in religion because he rejected the Greek's division of body and soul which puts a negative value on the body. King emphasized the goodness of the body; hence, he regarded emotion as healthy, though he did not glorify emotionalism. King criticized the overtly emotional Black Church but reserved his greater criticism for the emotionless, lifeless middle-class Black Church which insensibly rejected his culture. Here is King's approval of the importance of emotion in worship:

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[108] King, Trumpet of Conscience, 69.

[109] Washington, "The Roots and Fruits," 129.

[110] Washington, Black Religion, 10.

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> The other type of Negro church that feeds no midnight traveler has developed a class system and boasts of dignity, its membership of professional people, and its exclusiveness. In such a church the worship service is cold and meaningless, the music dull and uninspiring, and the sermon little more than a homily on current events. If the pastor says too much about Jesus Christ, the members feel he is robbing the pulpit of dignity. If the choir sings a Negro Spiritual, the members claim an affront to their class status. This type of church tragically fails to recognize that worship at its best is a social experience in which people from all levels of life come together to affirm their oneness and unity under God. At midnight men are . . . given bread that has been hardened by the winter of morbid class consciousness.[111]

King made constructive use of emotion in Black religion. He directed a Black people's zeal, energy, and emotion toward working for freedom from the oppression of racism and segregation.

King's Liberation Message and the Black Church

The Black Church produced and nurtured Martin Luther King. Although there were pockets of social consciousness in the Black Church, the Black Church in the first half of the twentieth century forgot the historic social stance of its founders and concentrated on an otherworldly Christianity. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who refocused the vision of the Black Church toward the goal of freedom and social concerns. This came out of the agonizing experience of the Montgomery bus boycott.

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[111] King, Strength to Love, 47-489.

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King's answer to Rev. Dr. Frazier, the representative of Montgomery white citizens' interest, pointed the direction in which the Negro church in America was to go. Angered that the Montgomery bus boycott was being led by ministers of the Gospel, Frazier contended that the job of minister is to lead souls to God and not to bring about confusion by being tangled up in transitory social problems. He then called for the direction of minds to the glorious experience in the Christian faith centered in the Babe of Bethlehem. King appropriately answered:

> We too know the Jesus that the minister just referred to. . . . We have had an experience with him, and we believe firmly the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. I can see no conflict between our devotion to Jesus Christ and our present action. If one is truly devoted to the religion of Jesus he will seek to rid the earth of social evils. The gospel is social as well as personal. . . . As Christians we owe our ultimate allegiance to God and His will, rather than to man and his folkways.[112]

The Black Church combined the social and personal elements of the Gospel, pinned its allegiance to God against the folkways of racism in the South, marched ten years under King's leadership, and tumbled the walls of segregation to the ground. Since the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, engineered by the Black Church, a closer unity of personal and social concern has been its focus.

King's message was centered in the Black Church tradition which was based on the unwritten theology of an oral

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[112] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 117.

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Black community. "Our theologies," writes Cone, "have been presented in the forms of sermons, songs, prayers, testimonies, and stories of slavery and oppression."[113] These theologies in King's sermons and speeches, issued in freedom, hope, and liberation, are retold in the Black sermon style and the Negro Spirituals. King's sermons always related Christian freedom to the current struggles in this world. Cone insightfully suggests that, "When it seemed as if freedom was difficult to realize in the world, Martin King did not despair but moved its meaning to an eschatological realm as defined by the black church's claim that 'the Lord will make a way somehow.'"[114] Thus the Black Church has proven that it has a resilience that fights despair and disintegration. Cone writes of Black Christian's tenacity to survive oppression:

> In their failure to establish freedom in their existing present, black people prevented despair from becoming the defining characteristic of their lives by looking forward to God's coming, eschatological freedom.[115]

It was this same Black resilience, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of Black people's frustration and anger against white racism, that molded King's liberation themes in the heritage of the Black Church and fashioned a Black Theology. Cone, as a representative of

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[113] Cone, "Black Theology--Black Church," 417.

[114] Ibid., 419.

[115] Ibid.

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Black Theology, speaks of its relevance to thinking Blacks:

> European and North American theologians have stifled the indigenous development of the theological perspectives of blacks by teaching us that our own cultural traditions are not appropriate sources for an interpretation of the Christian gospel. Europeans and White North Americans taught us that the Western theological tradition as defined by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and Schleirmacher is the essential source for a knowledge of the Christian past. But when black theologians began to concentrate on black culture and history, we realize that our own historical and cultural traditions are far more important for an analysis of the gospel in the struggle of freedom than are Western traditions which participated in our enslavement. We now know that the people responsible for or indifference to the oppression of blacks are not likely to provide the theological resources for our liberation. If oppressed people are to be liberated, they must themselves create the means for it to happen.[116]

What Cone expresses here was lived out in King's use of Black history in the slave songs. It was King who pointed to the richness and meaning of those songs in his sermons and speeches, from the march on Montgomery to the march on Washington. Black Theology theologians must have been instructed when King explained why he used the slave songs antebellum in civil rights meetings:

> An important part of the mass meetings was the freedom songs. In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of songs the slaves sang--the sorrow songs, the shouts of joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the

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[116] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 19-20.

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> movement are inspired by their words. "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Freedom," is a sentence that needs no music to make its point. We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that "We shall overcome Black and white together. We shall overcome someday."
>
> I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round." It is not just a song, it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around from an onrush of a police dog, refuse to turn around from a pugnacious Bull Connor in command of men armed with power hoses. These songs bind us together, give us courage together, help us to march together.[117]

It is significant that Cone, the person at the cutting edge of Black Theology, acknowledges that he is indebted to King not only in the content of Black liberation theology but also the style, "the form of language itself. Martin King has been helpful in the accomplishment of this task."[118]

Amidst Black despair, King, drawing from his Black Church heritage in the slave songs, carved out a theology of hope. In this, "King combined the exodus-liberation and cross-love themes with the message of hope found in the resurrection of Jesus. Hope for him . . . was based on his belief in the righteousness of God as defined by his reading of the Bible through the eyes of his slave fore-parents."[119] With rear theological insight, King employed

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[117] King, Why We Can't Wait, 61

[118] Cone, "Black Theology--Black Church," 418.

[119] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 15.

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the prophet Jeremiah to express his slave forebears' hope thus:

> Centuries ago Jeremiah raised a question. "Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there no physician?" He raised it because he saw the good people suffering so often and the evil people prospering. Centuries later our slave fore parents came along and they too saw the injustices of life and had nothing to look forward to, morning after morning, but the rawhide whip of the overseer, long rows of cotton and the sizzling heat; but they did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries and they took Jeremiah's question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point. And they could sing, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul."[120]

James Cone describes King's insight here as "the most powerful expression in Black history of the essential themes of Black religious thought from the integrationist viewpoint."[121]

Summary

King's preaching and speaking were not wide-eyed and illusory. They were concrete--this-worldly. His message was indeed a liberation that aimed at Blacks' total liberation in American society. He spent all his life and thought fighting against white racism in its various forms. King successfully attacked segregation in the South and, when racism's psychological barriers were lifted and all were free to participate in the social amenities of public life, he pointed out the economic poverty of Blacks.

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[120] Cited by Cone from King sermon, "Thou Fool," 14.

[121] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 15.

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Consequently, King challenged industries and stores to hire Blacks and create better economic opportunities for all. But he also thought Blacks could challenge unfair hiring practices. So, often he would ask Blacks to withdraw their purchasing support from businesses which refused employing Blacks on a fair basis.

Yet King was critical of middle-class Blacks living above their means, and called for thrift among all Blacks. He saw Black thrift and Blacks exercising their voting rights as a means of social uplift of the race.

For King, racism and oppression must be fought relentlessly. Hence, he adopted the prophetic model of a revolutionary who visited city after city to fight racial and economic injustice in America. He often quoted approvingly this Negro Spiritual, "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free."[122]

Yet, for King, liberation from white oppression must be done through the spirit of love and nonviolence because the goal is integration and community. Consequently, liberation and reconciliation must be bound together because unjust means cannot earn just ends. The means and ends must cohere, King often said.

But King's themes of liberation of Blacks from racial and economic oppression, his emphasis on justice, freedom,

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[122] King, Where Do We Go From Here, 12.

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and hope here and now, his insistence on Blacks getting political power--all these and more of King's thoughts have given rise to Black Theology. For Black Theology's goal was King's goal--the liberation of Blacks in American society for a better life here and now. But this liberation for King and Cone must be grounded in Jesus Christ.

Unlike Black Theology theologians who place liberation prior to reconciliation, with King liberation and reconciliation are the same. For King, there is no ultimate liberation outside of the beloved community.

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CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

In his intellectual odyssey, King was influenced by the scholarship of liberal American Protestantism. However, the overt influence of the academy on King's thought must not obscure the fact that the Black Church greatly impacted King's life and thought.

The Black Church, born in adversity and racial oppression, shaped the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. His entire life was immersed in the religion of the church. An honest research into the life and thought of King cannot but conclude that racial oppression of his race and the Black Church greatly influenced everything he thought, everything he did, and everything he was. Significantly, King suggested how he ought to be assessed. In a paper written at Crozer Seminary, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," King perceptively advised, "It is impossible to get at the roots of one's religious attitudes without taking in account the psychological and historical factors that play upon the individual."[1] Yet King's intellectual biographers and others have written articles and books about his life and work without seriously considering the psychological and historical factors of

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[1] King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," 5.

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racism and the Black Church which significantly played upon King, the black man.

In this paper, King also spoke warmly of the impact of religion on his life from his youth:

> At present I still feel the affects of the noble moral and ethical ideals that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me and even in moments of theological doubt I can never turn away from them. Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life.[2]

The religion that was closely knitted to his life, the religion of which King spoke as life itself, was certainly not the white religious influence learned at Crozer and Boston but the religion of the Black Church in which he was steeped from childhood.

The Black Church and its influence so impacted King that his graduate work was a veritable "intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil"--racism.[3] When he found that method, he unequivocally stated that "this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."[4] The search was motivated by blackness and the goal of the search was the elimination of racial oppression of Blacks in the United States.

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[2] Ibid., 15.

[3] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 91.

[4] Ibid., 97.

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As early as January 17, 1963, in an address at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, King unabashedly declared:

> I am happy to say that the nonviolent movement in America has come not from secular forces but from the heart of the Negro church. This movement has done a great deal to revitalize the Negro Church and to give its message a relevant and authentic ring. The great principles of love and justice which stand at the center of the nonviolent movement are deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage.[5]

Later in his now famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King repeated this fact--"I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle."[6]

Therefore, it was in the context of the Black Church with its tradition and culture, oppression and hope, that King did his interpretation. His vision was shaped by the Black Church and that vision was primarily devoted to the liberation of Blacks from racism and, secondarily, the creation of the beloved community. King embraced the philosophy of personalism because he saw in it intellectual elements that could be employed in the struggle to eliminate segregation and other aspects of racism in America. The concept that the ground and essence of all reality is a personal God who guides, loves, strengthens,

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[5] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Address to the National Conference on Race and Religion," Chicago, 17 Jan. 1963, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, 13.

[6] King, Why We Can't Wait, 87.

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and keeps his people is a great source of strength to a disinherited Black people. The derivative concept that man was created in the image of a personal God is a cogent argument to Judeo-Christian America for the brotherhood of the Black person. King was attracted to these personalistic concepts because they contain the seeds for Black liberation. However, the idea of a personal God as the essence of all reality, and the belief that man was created in God's image is a Biblical tenet of the Black Church tradition in which King was raised. These concepts King readily utilized in the quest to overcome racism.

King's interpretation of Scripture was brought to bear on the struggle against racial oppression. His Christology predicated on love and Christ's cross is a model of suffering and victory for the nonviolent participants in the stride toward freedom. Love-the-enemy cross, though a symbol of pain and suffering, is also a victory in community, for "We Shall Overcome," they sang meaningfully. The cross and the resurrection give Christians the assurance that victory over the collective evil of racism is possible. "We must see the cross," King wrote, "as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and light conquering darkness."[7] In this statement King had the race question in mind. For King, loving the enemy is "the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. . . . Love creates

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[7] King, Strength to Love, 33.

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and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."[8] In the spirit of the cross, King offered Blacks love of the enemy as a solution to the black-white problem in America. The following is one of King's oft-quoted themes:

> There will be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed men develop the capacity to love their enemies. The darkness of racial injustice will be dispelled only by the light of forgiving love. . . . We must in strength and humility meet hate with love.[9]

King saw the cross, the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit as symbols of God's triumph over the forces of evil which seek to block community. The nonviolent civil rights workers, under the influence of God's salvific acts at the cross, struggled in suffering and love to restore broken community.[10]

King fused his New Testament understanding of love at the cross with the spirit of the Old Testament prophets and carved out an interpretation consistent with the Black preachers of antebellum. In this connection, King, informed by the interpretation of Richard Allen and David Walker of the eighteenth century Black Church, interpreted the Exodus story as analogous to the Black American situation. Thus, the Black struggle in the United States is a continuing chapter of the same Exodus story. America is symbolized as Egypt, segregationists are Pharaohs,

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[8] Ibid., 38.

[9] Ibid., 39.

[10] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 105-106.

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segregation itself is evil, Blacks and other oppressed people of the Third World are Israel. The freedom fighters in America are Moses. The Exodus story, with its details, King skillfully interpreted in the Black Church tradition to give meaning and hope to a people trapped in segregation and economic exploitation.[11]

King not only interpreted Scripture in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets but the eighth century B.C. prophets also became the model for his ministry. Thus, when he was accused in Birmingham of being an outside agitator, he answered:

> . . . I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.
>
> Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.[12]

As a modern prophet, fighting the evil of racism, King confessed, "Whenever I come a struggle takes place between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. . . ."[13]

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[11] King, Strength to Love, 58-66.

[12] King, Why We Can't Wait, 77.

[13] King, "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 9.

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King's prophetic stance did not come from Walter Rauschenbusch of Crozer nor any social gospel advocate in the white academy. For Christian ethics was being discussed all over America in white seminaries and churches without a serious reference to segregation as a hindrance to Christian love and unity. King called for a prophetic witness comparable to Amos' of the Bible to deal with the question of segregation. "It is impossible," King argued, "to discuss the question of segregation in America against the background of ethics without discussing the urgent need for genuine prophets."[14]

King saw that theology and church postures were tailored to defend the status quo. Thus King called for an interpretation of Christian ethics in which the prophets of America will speak now that Christians must obey the demands of the Almighty in race relations or capitulate to the transitory demands of the defenders of the status quo.[15] He was one of the few genuine prophets in the 1950s and 1960s America.

Contrary to what Smith and Zepp and others of their school think, the irenic King, prating platitudinous philosophies of Brightman, Davis, DeWolf, Tillich, Gandhi, and Niebuhr, could not stir Black people to risk their lives in the fight for racial justice. An examination of

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[14] King, "For All - A Nonsegregated Society," 6-7.

[15] Ibid., 7.

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white writers of King's movement reveals that they neither understand Blacks nor the Black struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Euro-American ideas and philosophies unrelated to Black American needs and culture, eloquently spoken by an able orator, could not have fueled the Black revolution in the South. What then stirred Blacks to action in the 1950s and 1960s in American's South? The impetus was a combination of King's radical interpretation of the Bible, the slave stories and tales, and American participatory democracy woven in sermons, speeches, and songs. King's interpretation of the prophets informed by agape, love, of the New Testament was most effective because both King and his Black hearers shared that interpretation in the Black Church tradition. The stories of a Moses calling to Pharaoh, "Let My People Go," and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refusing to bow to the golden image, to name a few, and their interpretation are all too familiar to Blacks. King filled these familiar Bible stories with elements for Black liberation and touched the hearts of a suffering people.

The slave stories with their suffering and hope are part and parcel of Black history, culture, and life. These, King skillfully retold in sermons, songs, and speeches which cut across the class barriers of Blacks and reached the deepest emotions of Black Americans.

American democratic ideas of freedom, liberty, and equality abound in America's culture and Constitution.

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King used these household ideas to point to Negroes' rights and heritage as Americans. King called on Blacks to share the dream, America's dream, of freedom, liberty, equality, and life enshrined in the Constitution for all. All over America, King challenged and inspired Blacks:

> In a land that was founded on justice, the Negro is "seared in the flames of sweltering injustice;" in a land of freedom, the Negro is "crippled by the manacles of segregation;" in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty. . . . I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice . . . will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."[16]

King mingled the Biblical themes of love and justice, the slave stories of suffering and hope, with American democratic principles of liberty, freedom, and equality in the tone and voice of the Black Baptist preacher, with the slave songs of antebellum, and electrified Blacks of the South in myriad demonstrations against racial oppression. This Black revolution King spearheaded led to the dismantling of segregation in the South and to Congressional votes for civil rights acts ensuring justice for all. Above all, the Black revolution of the 1950s and 1960s has created a new Negro who has regained the "sense of somebodiness."[17]

King's interpretation, in the context of the Bible and his Black preaching forebears, has revived a messianic

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[16] King, "March on Washington," 6-7.

[17] King, Why We Can't Wait, 30.

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stream that dates back to both Richard Allen, the founder of the A.M.E. Church in 1787, and David Walker who authored Walker's Appeal in 1829. King, as well as Walker and Allen before him, believed that God has chosen the Negro race to humanize and Christianize civilization. Richard Allen admonished Black slaves that, despite the cruelty of their masters, they were to follow the humble Jesus and love their oppressor. Although Walker advocated violence--slave revolt--as a means of liberation, he too saw a messianic role for Black people in America. Walker explicitly declared:

> It is my solemn belief that if ever the world becomes Christianized (which must certainly take place before long) it will be through the means, under God of the blacks, who are now held in wretchedness, and degradation by the white Christians of the world. . . .[18]

Shot through King's writings, the Negro has been cast in messianic roles. But nowhere is this role explicitly stated as in the last page of his book, Stride Toward Freedom. King wrote after the flush of victory in the Montgomery bus boycott:

> This is a great hour for the Negro. The challenge is here. To become the instruments of a great idea is a privilege that history give occasionally. Arnold Toynbee says in A Study of History that it may be the Negro who will give the new Spiritual dynamic to Western Civilization that it so desperately needs to survive. I hope this is possible. The spiritual power that the Negro can radiate to the world comes from love, understanding,

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[18] Allen, The Life Experience, 70.

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> goodwill, and nonviolence. It may even be possible for the Negro, through adherence to nonviolence, so to challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction. In a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, nobody can win a war. Today the choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. The Negro may be God's appeal to this age--an age drifting rapidly to its doom. . . .[19]

King's interpretation has created a Black theology in American religion. Both King and Cone read the Bible through the eyes of their grandparents and "started to speak of God's solidarity with the wretched of the earth." Black theology is also de-emphasizing Western theological tradition and affirming Black history.[20]

The future of King's study lies in the explication of the Black messianic role, mated with a Black theology of liberation.

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[19] King, Stride Toward Freedom, 224.

[20] Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion," 19.

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